CAROLINE BOURNE
She was lost in his embrace, enflamed by his desire...
DESERT FIRE

TEXAS FIRE

CAROLINE BOURNE

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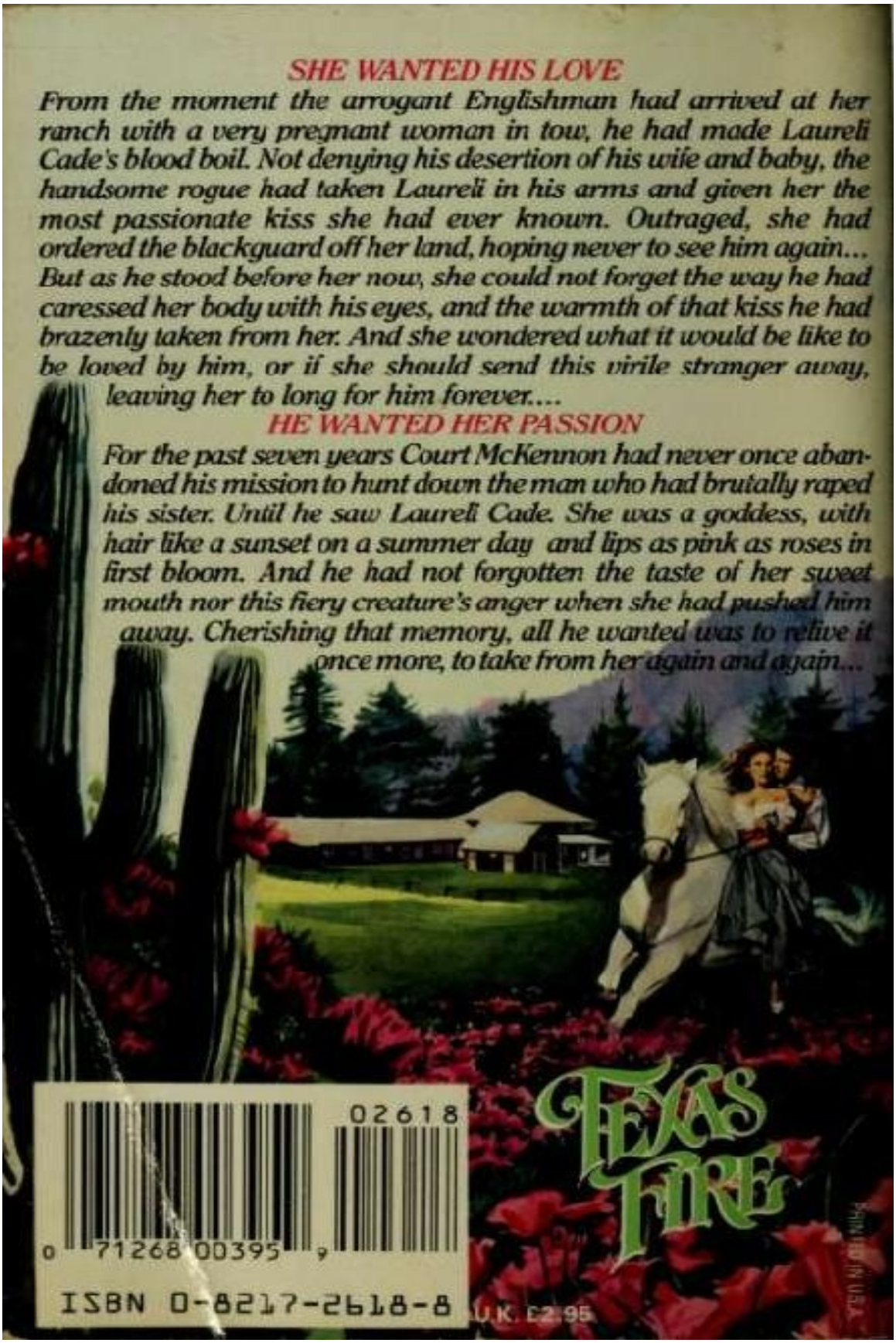
SHE WANTED HIS LOVE
From the moment the arrogant Englishman had arrived at her ranch with a very pregnant woman in tow, he had made Laureli Cade's blood boil. Not denying his desertion of his wife and baby, the handsome rogue had taken Laureli in his arms and given her the most passionate kiss she had ever known. Outraged, she had ordered the blackguard off her land, hoping never to see him again... But as he stood before her now, she could not forget the way he had caressed her body with his eyes, and the warmth of that kiss he had brazenly taken from her. And she wondered what it would be like to be loved by him, or if she should send this virile stranger away, leaving her to long for him forever....
HE WANTED HER PASSION
For the past seven years Court McKennon had never once abandoned his mission to hunt down the man who had brutally raped his sister. Until he saw Laureli Cade. She was a goddess, with hair like a sunset on a summer day and lips as pink as roses in first bloom. And he had not forgotten the taste of her sweet mouth nor this fiery creature's anger when she had pushed him away. Cherishing that memory, all he wanted was to relive it once more, to take from her again and again...
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TEXAS FIRE

Prologue

London, June, 1850

The fashionably dressed young woman moved swiftly around the corner of Bedford Street and New Row. The pert, impetuous brunette enjoyed sauntering through those places of Covent Gardens forbidden by her stern, hawk-nosed father. She enjoyed the admiring looks of the men who frequented the gardens. She enjoyed standing beside The Theatre Royal, where the famous actor, James Quinn, had performed so many, many years before. She had read everything about him, beginning with his birth on King Street, until his questionable death some years after he had gained the fame and notoriety of the theater society. She could quote his first theatrical lines as he had shaken his fist at the cast and shouted, ‘‘Babylon! Babylon! Sodom and Gomorrah! Give your books to the public hangman for burning!”

Colleen, herself, had a dream to be an actress, though her father would not take too kindly to this information if he knew of her ambitions. Only harlots and women of the streets flaunted their theatrics on the stage. Her father, loving her as he did, would certainly prefer to rake her over the coals of New Castle than see her condemned to so vile a fate as the theater. So, Colleen was content to wish upon that invisible star that hung over the many theaters of Covent Gardens. In secret, she had gotten engagements as a “masquerader” at a few of the theaters, including The Theatre Royal, where she had been cheered by audiences delighted with her songs. She had no worries that her father might learn of her lurid escapades, since his gout prevented him from leaving the comfort of their house overlooking Kensington Park. He knew that Colleen frequently left the house, but she had left on the pretense of visiting the aging Madame Delafield, who lived just a few doors down from the large townhouse she shared with her father. She was such a good, faithful daughter that he never questioned her destination. And, of course, guilt, associated with the frequent lies that she told, usually tore at Colleen’s heart.

But the excitement of the stage was much greater than devotion to her father. She knew everything there was to know about the theater. She had heard some of the older matrons speaking of Congreve’s *The Way of the World*, which had opened in December of 1732. She knew every word and every grieved emotion that had touched the faces of the performers in *The Beggar’s Opera*. Oh, if only she could be one of them! If only she could don period costume and quote famous lines before audiences of thousands... no, tens of thousands! Surely, she

would earn their standing ovations and become an overnight sensation throughout England, perhaps, even, all of Europe.

Colleen's favorite theater was the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, the leading Italian opera house in the capital. Its first play, *Semiramide*, had opened in April of 1847, and her father, who had been younger and healthier although only three years had passed since, had taken her to the performance. At the age of fourteen, it had been the most wonderful experience of Colleen's life. Certainly it had created her first spark of life and love for the theater.

At seventeen, her lovely features, tiny figure, and warm and witty disposition could win her the wealthiest of London's eligible bachelors. She lived and breathed the theater and a certain young actor, giving no more thought to her frequent gentlemen callers than one might give to fish and chips. She would chat about the theater for hours on end to anyone who would discuss it with her, her audience frequently consisting only of the doting widow, Madame Delafield. Years ago, the heavily rouged, aging matron had found her first and only love in the theater, and she was now confined to her rooms by frequent bouts of illness. Thus, Madame Delafield sympathized with the comely young Colleen, who had recently met a handsome actor—her third cousin actually, considered one of the many black sheep of the family—whom she knew only by his stage name: Gye Bedford. No one in the family would discuss the embarrassing young member of the family with Colleen, though she had attempted many times to bring up the conversation. Madame Delafield had tried several times through her own acquaintances to find out his real name, but all she had ever accomplished was to learn that his last name was the same as Colleen's. The young woman found that very amusing, since she harbored hopes of one day becoming Gye's wife.

Colleen was anxious to leave Madame Delafield that warm Monday afternoon, since Gye had promised to meet her at five o'clock in front of the coffeehouse at forty-three King Street. She looked at the small gold filigree watch hanging from the chain at her neck: quarter to five. She did not want to be late, though she was aware that it was fashionable for a lady of society not to be punctual for an engagement.

Gye was everything she had ever dreamed of in a man: He was witty, charming and talented, able to recite the lines of Hamlet as though they were as much a part of him as his life's blood. To Colleen, he was gentle and good. She had experienced nothing roguish and coarse about him, despite what other members of the family reported in cryptic, one-line insults. Colleen could not understand why her parents—indeed, her entire family—disapproved of Gye. They had not yet met him and had no intentions of doing so. When her father had learned that the family's black sheep was in the theater, and that Colleen was inventing ways

to see him, Colleen had been forbidden ever to see the man known as Gye Bedford again. But that was a restriction she had no intention of honoring. She loved her father very deeply, but her happiest moments were spent with Gye. Colleen was also aroused to rebellion by the mere fact that her father did not hold such a tight leash on her older sisters, and never had.

Meeting her as planned, Gye took her hands and squeezed them between his strong but gentle ones. His attentions to the beautiful young woman at his side were stolen for the briefest of moments by an acquaintance of the theater. He nodded, then immediately returned his gaze to the coquettish brunette. They shared small characteristics of their very distant relationship: slightly upturned noses and almond-shaped eyes, though the color of Gye's were a rare phenomenon—one blue and one green—but their tints were so light that only a very close scrutiny would betray the rarity. They even shared the characteristic of the tiny dimples gracing each of their left cheeks.

Colleen's eyes were humored, studying him as though she had never seen him before. "Gye, your wig... you forgot to remove your wig."

Gye brushed playfully at the unnaturally red, moppish wig. "Yes, I know," he replied, his beguiling smile momentarily taking her off her guard. "But if I remove it now, we shall certainly draw attention, and possibly from someone who knows your father and will not hesitate to report our meeting."

Colleen's very look idolized him, adored him... wanted his every attention as though he existed only for her. Even the wig did not detract from his masculine good looks. "And what plans have you for us today?" she asked in a soft, almost seductive whisper.

Though most actors were coarse and common, their backgrounds questionable and certainly decadent, every word that Gye uttered hinted at his good breeding. Even parents with black sheep tried very hard to repatriate them into the family. Certainly, the effort had been made with Gye. At the moment, he was concerned only with Colleen and the look of adoration in her eyes. He was so drunk that he had considered not meeting her today, so that she would not be disillusioned should he become somewhat of a bully. He could not bear the thought of disappointing her. Although he had no immediate recollections, friends and acquaintances had frequently related vile acts he had committed during his bouts of drunkenness. ‘‘Of course, I have plans," he replied after a moment. "But I have not yet asked how my beautiful lass is today."

Suddenly, Colleen caught the very heady whiff of whiskey in Gye's words. Since she had not known him to be a drinker, she was a little surprised. Perhaps he and some of his friends had found a cause for celebration, be it large or small. Certainly, the smell of whiskey on his breath was an isolated occurrence, since

she had met with him many times before and he had always been sober. Because she cared so deeply for him, she would forgive him this one time for deviating from his gentle character. Thus, she blushed prettily, dropping her eyes for only a moment, then lifting them. “You do tease me so, Gye,” she chastised without true feeling. Actually, she very much loved his flattery, his little advances, the way his hands roamed upward on her satin sleeves and eventually settled on her slim shoulders.

Gye Bedford, tall and straight and beautifully attired in gray trousers and jacket, took Colleen’s arm and drew it through his own. “My lovely, we shall not walk in the park today. Come... I have something to show you.”

These past weeks he had been kind and wonderful, showing her the wild spring blossoms of the park at places where no one else walked, frequently spreading a blanket so that they could sit in the shade, hidden from the view of other passersby and giggling at the fact that they were never detected. This afternoon, however, he had no blanket with him and did not guide her to the beautiful parks where they had spent many lovely moments. He took her instead through the alley beside the Craven’s Head Tavern in Drury Lane, mounted narrow steps as he coaxed his very hesitant companion ahead, then took a key from his jacket pocket and opened an ancient lock. Though the building was ramshackle, the door opened into what appeared to be a clean, dainty ladies’ parlor, with chintz curtains at the windows, floral wallpaper in shades of rose and blue, and rich Queen Anne furnishings.

‘‘Oh, Gye, we shouldn’t be here. It is...” Colleen giggled. “The haven of a lady of the evening. I do declare—”

Gye pushed the door closed with his foot, and his finger touched Colleen’s mouth as he pulled her to him. “No, I have made special arrangements with the tenant. This evening it is ours. Colleen—just yours and mine. Darling coquette, have I ever told you how dear you are to me?”

Suddenly, he was holding her hands roughly, painfully, and Colleen, overpowered by the nauseating smell of whiskey on his breath, became very alarmed at this uncharacteristic roughness. But rather than betray her fright—because she did, in fact, idolize him—she merely laughed the tiniest laugh and tried to extract her hands. But Gye Bedford had no intentions of releasing them. Only now did firmness lace her well-educated voice.

“Gye, you are hurting me!” A wild, frightened aura took away the playfulness of her eyes, which cut quickly toward the door he had securely locked. The perfect Grecian features of Gye Bedford that had made many a woman swoon in the theater boxes suddenly closed the distance between them, and he dropped her to the soft, satin-covered bed. His ample mouth sought her own so painfully that

she fought his inappropriate advances. What had happened to her gentle, talented lover of the theater? She was too surprised to cry out, even if her bruised and violated mouth had not been imprisoned against his own. Briefly, a breath of space separated them and she whimpered, “Gye... please, Gye... what has gotten into you?”

“You, my darling,” he whispered intoxicatingly, capturing her tightly pressed mouth, forcing his tongue between her teeth as his right hand lowered and eased beneath the bodice of her fashionable blue gown. The stays pulled loose. “You know that we were destined to be together, lovely Colleen. After all, I idolize you as much as you idolize me. I am your god, therefore, you should be my goddess... fully, completely, in every sense.”

It was the liquor speaking, acting so brutally, certainly not the man she had fallen helplessly in love with. “N-no...” With her heart quaking as though it would burst form her chest. Colleen fought him. But she soon succumbed to the masterful caresses of his hands, to his mouth capturing hers, teasing her, her flesh tingling beneath his touch. Before she was quite aware of it, they were free of their clothing, which lay together in a heap on the floor and she welcomed the hardness of his body against her own with kittenish moans and teasing, evasive maneuvers. She gasped in painful wonderment as they fully, completely became one with the other, riveted, joined, rocking in gentle surcease so that the intoxication of passion assailed them both. His slim body became an impenetrable prison of taut masculine flesh above her, and she quivered with fevered excitement.

Colleen had seen only the courtly side of the very handsome Gye Bedford. They had shared kisses before. She had even allowed him to fondle her ample breasts through the scant fabric of her gowns. She had frustrated him before by drawing the line where her virtue was concerned. But now, her subtle protests were only past memories. She was as passion-filled as he was, and perhaps even more so.

As his mouth continued to maul hers bruisingly, their hotly fused bodies moved quickly toward the ultimate pleasure that both were eager for. One of Gye’s hands lifted to her slim, white neck, playing with the delicate chain on which her filigree watch dangled, and the other worked to the small of her back to draw her close in the final fevered moments of climax and fulfillment. She moaned with delirious anticipation of this new and wondrously painful experience.

Colleen managed only a tiny whimper, then uttered no other sounds as his hips pounded brutally against her tender thighs. As their bodies shuddered in unison. Colleen, who had dreamed only of the theater and of the man she had hoped might one day be her husband, suddenly realized the immoral act she had

committed—an act that would certainly revile her puritanical father. Her guilt and shame was insuperable, and certainly were the forces that compelled her to dart from the bed as quickly as Gye rolled from her.

She was sobbing bitterly as she pulled on her crumpled clothing, fighting the gentle, seeking hands of Gye Bedford, still nude behind her on the satin bed, refusing to hear the soothing words he whispered against her hairline.

‘‘Colleen, what is this emotion? Did you not want me?”

“It was wrong,” she sobbed uncontrollably. “I had thought that only a husband and wife—”

His hands tried to clutch her shoulders, even as she fought to break his firm embrace. “Is that what you wanted—a husband? Darling, don’t you know that I —”

With the last of her garments pulled on. Colleen, closing her ears against his gentle declarations, slipped her feet into her shoes and rushed toward the door. Only then did Gye jump into action and hastily pull on his trousers and shirt. “Colleen!” She pulled open the door and darted to the small platform at the top of the stairs. “Colleen, wait!” She had just begun her descent when Gye caught up with her. But in her frantic desire to get away, the railing broke and she fell thirty feet to the alley below. “Colleen! Dear God—” Gye rushed down the stairs just as a ragged old man stepped from the shadows of the alley.

Colleen was crumpled upon the cobbled alleyway like a well-fondled rag doll. Gye turned her over and a tiny trickle of blood flowed from her mouth.

The man who stood fifty feet away screamed “Murderer! Police... murderer!”

His concern only for Colleen, Gye ignored the accusation and gently shook the woman he loved. “Good God, my darling, the theatrics are ended!” He was so panic-stricken that he was unaware of the idiocy of his words. “You can get up now. In our play we have accidentally broken this—” He continued, holding the tangled length of the chain linked into the loop of the watch: “And we must get it repaired for you. We wouldn’t want your father to ask any questions about its fate now, would we?”

But Colleen did not arise. She did not even move. Anguish etched Gye’s handsome features as he forced himself to realize that her eyes stared blankly, that the unnatural, grotesque twist of her body was not a bit of coy, feminine theatrics. Horrified, Gye Bedford fled from the dark alleyway into the masses of theater and market patrons. He was irrational with fright as he heard the whistles of a dozen approaching policemen.

It was not supposed to have been like this.

She had wanted him, had teased and flaunted the ample endowments of her body. She had enjoyed their rough, intoxicating lovemaking as much as he

himself had enjoyed it. She had pretended her indignation as women before her had. Like the others. Colleen had given in to his seductive charms. But unlike the others. Colleen was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, though he had not gotten the chance to tell her. Why had she panicked when they should merely have lain in each other's arms in the aftermath of love? Why had she fallen?

The very frightened Gye Bedford was never again seen on a London stage.

Part One

No man can take him,
He scorns the hunter's dart.
And only a maiden's magic power
Shall tame his haughty heart.
Medieval ballad

Chapter One

As her thoroughbred mare sped like a kindred spirit along the Brazos River, the chestnut-haired Laureli Cade felt a cold November wind sting her flushed cheeks. She nudged the mare into a faster pace, hearing her heart pound in her ears, feeling her thick scarf slip from her shoulders and drift off, as if it were part of the wind chasing her through the forest. The mare snapped at the bit, her steel-hard muscles straining to open up as she gained speed despite Laureli's efforts to hold her back. She was a new horse, not yet accustomed to her commands.

Laureli Cade, one of the finest horse-women in all of Texas, had taken the strongest traits of both her parents: her very handsome father, Matthew Cade, who had given the gift of teasing affection when their eyes met; and her mother, Mariah, whose tall, willowy gracefulness reflected in Laureli's every move, in the deep sheen of her freshly washed hair, and in her haughty convictions. Truly, Laureli Cade was her mother's stubborn, willful daughter in every sense of the word.

She loved the new mare—Belleza (pronounced Be-ye-sa), her Spanish beauty—but Laureli longed to capture and tame the powerful white stallion that roamed the forests along the Brazos, untamed, untouchable, the elusive unicorn that no human hand had ever touched.

Seen only from a distance by the eyes of its two-legged foe, it roamed the plains, the forests, and the woodlands, and had stolen its fair share of mares from the surrounding farms and ranches. Still, there were those who would say that the stallion was not real but merely an illusion, a ghost with a restless soul.

The stallion was like a man with no heart: a gargoyle with no soul. He could

kill without conscience with one fierce kick of his rear hooves if he so chose, and leave so quickly that one might not have known he had ever been there. But Laureli knew that if the stallion could be tamed, she could tame him. If he could know the love of a human, then she would be that human. She had been so obsessed with the stallion over the five years since he had first been spotted that she had spent many long hours riding along the Brazos in search of him. She had seen him many times, like a gull, silver-lined against an azure sky, drifting into nothingness, only to reappear in her dreams at night.

The stallion was truly a strange phenomenon. He had not appeared on the Brazos until the small line shack, which had been Mariah's private sanctuary, had been carefully disassembled and removed from its former location to the hill where, ironically, her Uncle Jessie had claimed to have found a large cache of Aztec gold many years ago. Rather than going to the expense of building a new cabin to be used by the men who rode the ranges, Mariah's old line shack had been moved instead. It was then that the stallion had appeared on the Brazos, and where he had been ever since.

Soon, the swirling smoke of Wildwood's chimney became a low-flying puff floating off toward the golden timberline. All that was left of the day was now slowly settling into a gray-black twilight. Storm clouds gathered upon the far horizon, threatening rain, yet Laureli wanted only to feel the firm, muscled mare against her thighs, and the wind whistling through her long, disheveled tresses.

The forest trail widened as the distance closed between the mare and Wildwood, the wealthy estate where Laureli had been born twenty-three years before. The skeletal branches of oaks and poplars closed in on her, snatching at the cape hugging her slim, bare shoulders. Tia would not approve if she'd seen the way she'd left Wildwood that afternoon, her low-bodiced blouse unfit for the weather, and her long black skirt pulled between her legs, so that she could ride her horse bareback and astride. She had, however, thought to cover her inappropriate attire with a long cape and a scarf around her neck, and that might satisfy dear old Tia somewhat. But, oh dear, she remembered that the scarf had drifted off with the wind, and she had not bothered to retrieve it. Well, perhaps Tia would not see her today.

Immediately, an ominous presence on horseback caused her to halt. In the darkness, her pale blue eyes met the matching older ones of her grandfather. Poppy. A rebellious fire surging through her veins, she tried to ease her mare around him on the darkened trail. Poppy immediately nudged his own horse into her path.

"Poppy, I'm still angry with you," she somberly announced, lifting a defiant chin as she remembered how he had chastised her earlier in the day for riding off

and not telling anyone her destination.

Poppy's eyes narrowed. He remembered his own daughter—Laureli's mother—at that age, and her habit of disappearing for hours into the backlands of their Texas ranch. He had scolded her then, and he felt he had every right to scold his granddaughter in the same manner. "Sure you are," he replied, undaunted. "It's time to be getting to the house, Laureli. I promised your parents I'd look out for you. They trusted you to be sensible. Don't disappoint them."

"I'm merely riding, Poppy. What is wrong with a nice evening ride? Besides, Belleza needs to be ridden. She strains terribly at the bit and is so intent on having her own way!"

"She is like you," Poppy countered with a humorous chuckle. ''Belleza is a perfect match to her mistress: stubborn, defiant, wanting her own way in everything! Now, tell your Poppy, did you see the stallion today?"

"Not today," she replied, disappointment lacing her reply. "It is as though he can appear and disappear at will."

Laureli eased the mare up beside her grandfather and threw her arms around his muscled neck. At the age of sixty-eight, he was as strong as any younger man she had ever known, though ofttimes he suffered in his back and walked with a slight limp. His short cropped, graying hair tickled her cheek. "Oh, I do so love you, Poppy... you always care about my hopes and my dreams. You so much want me to have the stallion, don't you? Because you love me?"

"That I do, lass." Laureli continued to hold him, though she put just enough space between them to meet his pale blue gaze. "Tell me again about the day Mama found out who you were. Who you really were."

Gently, Poppy took her slim, bare arms and peeled them from his neck. His eyes met her inquisitive, waiting ones. "That old story, child? You've heard it a hundred—no, a thousand—times!"

"Just once more," she asked with pleading, upturned eyes.

"Aye... sure, just once more. That'll be the day! Come—" Poppy turned his horse on the trail, coaxing his granddaughter to ride just ahead of him. "It was a warm, sunny day in August, Laureli," he began, his gruff voice echoing in the November forest. "I had lived here on the Brazos, watching my own daughter grow up—my own beautiful Mariah, your mother, who thought William Palmer was her true father."

"You forgot the part about prison, Poppy. In England."

"Aye, girl," he chuckled. "You should tell this story... not me!" He paused and moved a branch out of the way so that it would not strike his beloved granddaughter. "Yes, prison," he continued after a moment. "I had been imprisoned at Newgate, a bestial place a girl such as yourself could never

imagine. I was to be hanged for a murder I did not commit."

"And you spent your last night with my grandmother, Claretta."

Poppy laughed at his inquisitive, interfering granddaughter, yet in the same moment the mention of his dear wife's name wrenched his heart as deeply as if it had been yesterday that he had last seen her. "That I did, child. The next morning... early, early, before the crows awakened and my tearful Claretta had parted from me, her father came to see me. Although he hadn't approved of his Claretta's marriage to me, out of respect and love for his daughter's choice of mates, he had agreed to transfer his house to a Newgate guard who would set me free before the hanging. In exchange, I had to agree never to contact my Claretta again. Wanting to live, of course, I agreed, but when I learned that the old man had passed on, I tried to find Claretta. I eventually followed her here, where I found her grave, and the grave of my tiny son—your mother's twin brother here at Wildwood, beneath a flowering dogwood."

"And you placed flowers on their graves for fifteen years, until Mama found out who you were."

"Seventeen years," Poppy corrected. "Watch for that low-lying branch, Laureli. Yes, for seventeen years, child. And I stayed here, to be near my daughter. Elsa, my wife's sister, knew all along who I was, but never let on until after she died. She wrote me a letter, asking me to make myself known to your mother. Ah, child, until that precious moment, I was able to live in the shadow of this land, guarding my daughter against harm and looking out for her without anyone being the wiser. Mariah was the only relation I had left in the world, and I wasn't going to lose her."

''And you walked out to Claretta's grave, and there you confessed to my mother that you were her father. Oh, how lovely, Poppy." Laureli was truly a dreamer; it often came to light in the beautiful songs she wrote and sang for her loved ones on special days, such as Christmas, which was coming up in just a few weeks. She had written a special song for all of them, but hoped to refine it before that day. Laureli had a voice like an angel; truly, her family swore that her voice had been a very special gift from God.

"That I did," Poppy replied after a moment, halting his horse when they entered the estate grounds of Wildwood. How could he ever forget that warm August day, sitting on a bench in the shadows of the dogwood tree, coaxing Mariah to him. He would never forget the look of love and adoration in her eyes as he had confessed to her that he was her father. He would never forget the tenderness of her arms circling his neck, as they had laughed and cried together in their happiness.

Shaking himself of his memories, which had brought a sheen of moisture to his

eyes. Poppy watched his beloved granddaughter ride on ahead, unaware that he had halted. He watched her tall, willowy frame and her straight stance as she sat astride her horse. Her hair was a rich auburn, lying in long, thick waves down her back, catching the evening glow of the moon like rays of gold. But those eyes! Poppy was proud that God had given her the color of his own eyes, so pale a shade of blue that they almost appeared white in the sunlight. She was a beauty, in her own right, with her exquisite oval face and high cheekbones, and almond-shaped eyes that were curious and intelligent, flanked by thick, black eyelashes and golden-red brows. Her mouth was full and sensuous, and as warmly pink as the roses growing profusely along the veranda of Wildwood. She was willowy, graceful, and as fiery and independent as her mother, who would take up any righteous cause that came along. Right now, Laureli was staunchly anti-slavery, that monumental evil crawling across the South, ensnaring the great state of Texas in its web of inhumanity.

Momentarily, Laureli turned toward her grandfather. She could not see his face in the darkness, but she knew he watched her intently. “I’ll be all right now, Poppy. See—” she continued, pointing toward the veranda of Wildwood, “there is Pietra stamping her foot in that outrageous fashion.’’

Pietra was Tia’s aging sister, who had been given a place in the Cade household when her husband of forty years had died. Tia had wanted her sister to live with her own family at Little Wildwood, but Pietra had preferred the proffered “paying” position at the Cade household that would allow her some independence. “Yes, I see,” Poppy replied. “I will go home then. Give Pietra my love, and be sure to brush down the mare before you put her away.”

“I will. Poppy... Belleza will be properly cared for.” She watched him disappear into the dark woodline and the trail that would take him north to the small ranch called Little Wildwood, the name her father had given the house. Much of the house had been restored and a new wing built when the old one had burned about ten years ago. It was a happy house and Laureli enjoyed her daily rides there, visiting Tia and Consuelo and Jessie’s large family. She and Jessie were the parents of eleven children—a figure whom Laureli, having only one brother, Timothy, held in awe. Of course, Jessie had adopted the four older Raines children when Consuelo’s first husband, Clyber, had died from the whiskey, then they had shared the joy of birth seven more times in so many years. Laureli was suddenly lonely for her seventeen-year-old brother, who was now attending West Point Military Academy in New York. Because there had been only the two children, Laureli and Timothy had gotten all of their parents’ doting attentions and the brunt of the parental discipline; not that they hadn’t both, more often than not, deserved the latter!

She called up to Pietra, “I’ll groom the mare and be right in. I’m starved. What’s for dinner?” But she entered the large, lofty barn lit only by a single lantern and did not await a reply. She was sure she’d gotten a whiff of Pietra’s delicious beef tamales and peppered potatoes.

Manuel, the young stable boy, stirred from his sleep in the corner of a stall. Laureli had tried for two years to coax the orphaned boy to better quarters at the house, but he had stubbornly refused. “Need Manuel, senorita?” he asked sleepily.

“No... go on back to sleep. I can manage.”

The boy eased back into the hay, his slim, dark arms instinctively drawing the crippled mongrel pup he’d found earlier in the week closer into his embrace. Laureli smiled. The former owner of Wild wood, Francisco Gomez, had bred Afghan pups, but the generations of breeding with mongrels had finally wiped out the line of fine dogs. The pup was probably an offspring of that once proud breed, but it was pure mongrel, possessing no greater treasure than the special affections of the little stable boy. Perhaps he saw a bit of his own tragic young life in the doleful eyes of the flop-eared pup.

Laureli quickly groomed her mare, then led her back to her stall, where she gave her an ample portion of hay and sweet feed, and filled her private trough with water from the well. Then she moved toward home, pausing a moment to study the stately house—the heartbeat of Wildwood—its black outline dominating the purple and gold sky forming a backdrop to so enchanting an image. In the twenty-five years that had passed since the death of Francisco Gomez, Wildwood had expanded from four thousand to forty thousand acres between the Brazos and Trinity rivers. Nine thousand head of longhorn and shorthorn cattle roamed its ranges and produced a fortune in revenues for the Cade family. But they were far from rich. Laureli’s generous parents supported every worthy cause and charity, and had donated the funds to build a hospital in San Antonio which was operated by the Daughters of the Virgin Mary under the control of the Catholic Diocese of that fair city. When fund-raisers had been held on the hospital grounds, her mother had always been there, frequently taking Laureli along for company.

Laureli linked her fingers at her back and sauntered slowly toward the house, taking in its peace and security as she traversed the wide steps. Entering the foyer brought her face-to-face with the irate and toe-stamping Pietra.

‘‘Your supper is cold now.”

“I like it cold,” Laureli replied, managing a small smile which usually elicited one from Pietra. The ploy worked, as usual.

Pietra continued to fuss as she walked just ahead of Laureli toward the dining

room. Laureli sat at her place, said the required blessing, and began stabbing at the still-steaming tamales. For someone who had been starving just moments ago, she now found that she really wasn't all that hungry; she was much too excited about the newly broken mare, and the prospect of riding her again along the shore of the Brazos.

"Will you attend the barn dance at the Traylor's tomorrow night?" Pietra asked, pouring a glass of cold milk for Laureli.

''I thought I would," she replied.

"You will go with that—that Johnny Raines?"

"Pooh!" Laureli replied, putting her fork aside. "Johnny Raines is such a bore! I am so tired of hearing about how my mother almost married his father before either of us were born. I'm tired of hearing how Clyber Raines had flopped in the hay with a prostitute at Tenoxtitlan and nine months later Johnny was born. And Clyber still married to Consuelo, at that! I'm just tired of it all! And, besides, Johnny tends to be a bit of a troublemaker, always fighting with the other men and boasting about stealing from the mercantile."

Pietra's plump face smiled its widest smile. "That's my girl! Smart enough to recognize trash and stay away from it! Who will you go with then?"

"I think I'll let Derrick drive me over."

"I don't think so!" Pietra sharply replied. "Derrick is a half-breed Mexican..."

"Derrick is your grandnephew!" Laureli shot back with equal ferocity. "Why don't you like Consuelo's children?"

"I like them fine... but they are half-breeds!"

"Listen to you, Pietra," Laureli said softly, settling back in her chair with obvious distaste. "Is it the Mexican half or the Anglo half that has riled your prejudicial fury? You are Mexican," she reminded her, "and I find nothing wrong with that. I will go with Derrick, whether you like it or not! Anyway... is there any man on the Brazos that you think suitable for me? Derrick is my very good friend, and I enjoy spending time with him."

Pietra cut a disapproving look at her young mistress, a look that Laureli pretended not to notice. Laureli had never completely understood Pietra's prejudices toward her own Mexicans, though she had heard gossip hereabouts that Pietra's husband had met with foul play at the Mexican authority. He had died a long, lingering and very painful death after drinking poison fed to him at a local cantina. The culprit had never been found, although a Mexican soldier had been suspected. That Pietra should harbor prejudicial resentment toward her own grandnephew was completely unreasonable.

"You go with him then," Pietra replied sullenly, turning toward the kitchen. "Throw your reputation to the wind and destroy your chances of finding a

respectable husband!”

“Oh, Pietra...” Laureli rose without touching the food and approached the aging housekeeper. “Sometimes you’re as ornery as that pet rooster you brought from Mexico eight years ago.”

‘‘Si... sometimes,” she replied, shrugging her large shoulders. Her black eyes held Laureli’s pale blue ones for a moment, then rolled like marbles caught in a glass decanter. “Perhaps your Pietra got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, eh?”

“Perhaps,” Laureli replied, hugging her tightly. “Oh, what would I do without you, Pietra?”

Only now did the solemn Pietra allow herself to smile. “You would not have Pietra to shoo Purgatory off your ankles, eh?”

Laureli, too, laughed as she remembered the vicious rooster she herself had named Purgatory. The beast had never failed to go after her in the barnyard with its spurs poised to attack her legs. She hated that rooster, and if she didn’t love Pietra so much, it would have become Sunday dinner a long time ago. But now it was too old and tough, and Laureli had no choice but to indulge its treacherous moods. One day, though, it would aim those sharp spurs at the wrong person, and gray-speckled feathers and red combs would drift off into the sky. Laureli laughed silently as the picture formed in her mind.

Derrick Palmer arrived promptly at six the following evening to escort Laureli to the dance. He was dressed in a new red and white checkered shirt and blue pants, and his long, unruly red hair had been swept back with a very overpowering, musk-scented oil. Freckles, the same color as his hair, speckled a thin face hardly able to grow much more than peach fuzz. And Derrick would soon be twenty-four!

The somber-faced Pietra opened the door to him. “Good evening. Aunt Pietra,” he greeted, removing his hat and holding it firmly against his chest. Consuelo’s children, ranging in age from eight to twenty-five years—Derrick being second eldest—were well aware of their great-aunt’s feelings. Only Derrick, though, had the courtesy and good graces to overlook her obvious and unexplained dislike.

“Harumph!” she responded, turning, slinging a feather duster out with a plump arm and motioning him to the sitting room. “Miss Cade will be down in a moment.”

Momentarily, Laureli bounced down the stairs, refusing to let Pietra’s solemn mood encompass her as well. She had chosen a low-bodiced gown of lavender and white cotton, and had pulled her auburn hair back in matching ribbons. “Derrick, how nice of you to escort me to the dance. Have you been waiting long?”

“Just arrived,” he replied, shyly looking at her from beneath thick copper-colored brows. “Pretty dress, Miss Laureli.”

Laureli enjoyed Derrick’s company. He was always a gentleman, and there were never masculine overtures to ward off, such as the ones she had suffered at the hands of the despicable Johnny Raines. He was like his father, Clyber, and the loathing of Laureli’s mother for that man was notorious along the Brazos. The elder Mr. Raines had never let Mariah Cade forget that she had jilted him for a dandy West Point officer—a traitor and a spy he had called him.

A wintry chill hung in the November air as the heavy wagon moved slowly on the water-bogged road. Laureli wished she had brought a warmer coat, rather than the thick, fringed shawl, which went so well with her dress. Vain suffering, Pietra would call it. Laureli did not have pleasant conversation to warm her. The quiet Derrick spoke very little, and then only to warn her to ‘‘hang on, a rut’s coming up.”

Soon, the light of a dozen lanterns emanating from the interior of the Traylor’s large barn came into view through the scant timberline. Many wagons and carriages sat along the road and young men, lifting stone jugs of corn whiskey to their mouths, laughed among themselves as they plotted childish mischief. Soon, the music of fiddles and the loud cadence of the dance caller muted the sounds of the night and the thunder rolling on the distant horizon. Derrick quickly alit, assisted Laureli down, and together they entered the warm, inviting interior.

The dancers had broken off in groups for the cuadrilla, a lively Spanish square dance that required energy and sure-footedness. It was one of Laureli’s favorite dances, but it had progressed too far for her to participate now. Thus, she and Derrick found a blank space of wall and joined the other non-dancers in loud, rhythmic hand-clapping. Then she spied Johnny Raines across the room, his eyes mockingly sweeping up and down her long, lithe form. Her hand-claps died as quickly as her smile. She tried to ignore him, but he was not one to be put off by silent rebuffs. He tucked a flask of whiskey into his shirt pocket and slowly began to move around the room toward Laureli.

“Shall I fetch a glass of punch for you, Laureli?” Derrick asked.

“Don’t leave me. Derrick,” Laureli whispered close to him.

“I see...” he immediately replied, nodding his head of bright red hair. “My half-brother is coming ‘round. Don’t you worry, Miss Laureli.”

Johnny was a giggling, dirty-minded creature, prone to taking from a woman that which was not readily offered. Tall and lean, with hair and eyes as black as coal, his handsome good looks had managed over the past few years to lure his share of pretty young victims into the various and sundry hay lofts of the county.

As he closed the distance between them, the smell of whiskey assaulted her

senses. Instinctively, Laureli eased behind Derrick's slim frame.

Johnny Raines slightly tipped his hat and smiled a beguiling half-cocked smile. "Good evenin', Miss Laureli Cade... half-brother Derrick." Even as he spoke, his eyes violated her body, settling, momentarily, on the roundness of her breasts eased flatteringly up by the tightness of her bodice. Unconsciously, Laureli hugged her shawl tighter to her, covering the objects of his bold attentions. His eyes lifted; as expected, there was no embarrassment there, only audacious mischief. "So glad you could make it tonight."

"Leave her alone," Derrick said indulgingly. He was forever trying to prevent tense encounters with that loathsome half-brother, hated every bit as much as his —their—natural father, Clyber Raines, had been before him. Every word Johnny uttered hung heavily with the odor of whiskey.

Laureli tried to ease farther behind Derrick, but Johnny seemed to enjoy filling, with mocking sure-ness, the place she had slowly vacated. "Thank you, Johnny... please won't you excuse me? Derrick and I were just going for punch."

"Punch? Hell! I've got something better than that!" he slurred, easing the whiskey flask out of his shirt pocket. "Want a little. Derrick, old boy? Say, where'd you get the shirt... off some greaser?"

If anyone in the world had a claim to bigotry, it was Johnny Raines. He hated the Mexicans, the blacks, and the Indians, as well as Catholics, Quakers, and Presbyterians. It seemed the only minority that did not earn his prejudice was a minority of one: Johnny Raines.

Derrick, half Mexican himself, started to give him a polite answer—to tell him that his mother had made the shirt, but Laureli's fingers closed firmly over his arm. "Actually, Johnny..." she lied, giving the tall dark-haired man her best smile, "I made the shirt for Derrick myself."

Johnny gave a half-hearted curtsey, again tipping his hat. "Pardon, ma'am... if I'd known your pretty little hands had sewn every stitch, I'd of taken it off his skinny shoulders and tucked it under my pillow tonight. I'm sure your lovely fragrance must linger all over it. Sure would make a man sleep right peacefully, don't you think?"

Laureli did not intend to glorify that remark with an insult or otherwise. She turned her head, linked her arm through Derrick's and coaxed him toward the banquet table.

Johnny Raines continued to dog their paths. "I saw the white stallion today," he said, attempting to pique her interest.

"I don't believe you," she announced without looking his way.

"Have it your own way, Miss Laureli. But—" From the corner of her eye, Laureli saw Johnny Raines lightly tip his hat. He was much too rude a man to

remove it indoors. ‘‘If you don’t start being a little nicer to me, I’m going to kill that stallion.”

Laureli felt her heart suddenly wrench painfully. But the pain did not reflect in her eyes. “You’ll never get close enough, Johnny Raines.”

“We’ll see. Miss Laureli... yeah, we’ll just see.”

Laureli could tell by that look in his dark, narrowed eyes, and the way he exaggerated his drunken swagger, that Johnny intended to cause trouble tonight. And, quite frankly, she was not in a mood for it. “Let’s forget the punch, Derrick,” she whispered. “I think we’d better go.”

Derrick, moved by anger, replied loudly enough that his half-brother could hear, “I can’t see us being driven off by that loud-mouthed, boasting, soused bully!”

That, unfortunately, was all Johnny Raines needed. Without warning, he made a bounding leap for Derrick, and the two young men fell backward to the floor. Johnny was able to get in one good punch to Derrick’s jaw before he was pulled up by two of the older men. In the confusion of others trying to get a better view, the fiddlers disrupted by the ruckus, and the banquet table overturned, Johnny was booted out of doors by his sober elders and ordered to leave the Traylor property. With one of the men now brandishing a rifle, Johnny mounted his horse, but not before he got in a round of flaying fists and drunken curses. Almost as quickly as the trouble had started, Johnny Raines disappeared in the dust of his fast-moving horse. Laureli knew from experience that Johnny would get his revenge. Last year he had childishly painted an obscenity on the side of the barn at Little Wildwood. But each time his modes of revenge got worse. One day he was going to hurt someone.

The banquet table had just been righted, most of the food salvaged, and the dance back in progress when Joe Fuller, one of the men from Wildwood, dismounted his horse. Laureli had been getting a bit of fresh air and was making apologies to one of the local women for the trouble Johnny had caused when Joe’s usually staid features, now pinched with worry, alarmed her.

‘‘Miss Laureli, you need to come back to Wildwood right away.”

‘‘What has happened, Joe? Pietra... word from my parents—”

Joe’s look very much frightened Laureli. She could not imagine what had happened.

Chapter Two

Fright sat on Laureli’s brow like a lethal thing. She could not bear the thought of something happening to her parents. But her mind was immediately put at ease when Joe replied, ‘‘No, miss. There’s a man at Wildwood, a stranger. His woman is ‘bout to drop a young’un. Pietra wants you home... and Derrick

there...” He motioned to Consuelo’s son. ‘‘He’s to fetch his ma and grandma.”

It had become something of a tradition to send for either Tia or Consuelo when a woman on the river went into labor. But to ask for both of them? It certainly sounded serious! Still, the women would be able to take care of the birthing, and there was no reason for Laureli to have to return, except, of course, to avoid being stranded at the Traylor barn with no way back home. “Why do you need me, Joe? I’ve never attended a birthing.”

“It ain’t for the birthin’ necessarily,” Joe replied. “It’s ol’ Pietra. She don’t like being’ alone in the house... with that stranger... the young missy’s husband, refusin’ to budge from the parlor.”

“Consuelo and Tia will be there,” Laureli reminded him.

“An’ you know how Pietra feels about them.”

“This man... the husband... does he look dangerous?” Laureli queried.

‘‘No... kinda friendly, if you ask me. But... you know Pietra—”

‘‘Very well,” Laureli replied. “I was really not in much of a mood for this get-together anyway.” Half turning from Joe, Laureli continued: “Derrick, take Joe’s horse and fetch the women to Wildwood. Joe and I will return in the wagon.”

As fast as Joe drove the wagon, one would have thought that Laureli, herself, was having the baby. Less than a mile from the Traylor house, the fast-moving wagon suddenly came upon a man walking along the road, and the team instinctively jerked off the main thoroughfare at a bend very near the Brazos. Laureli flew from the seat, landing in the icy water with a great splash. She cried out as she was sucked beneath the cold current. Immediately, she felt an arm dart beneath the water and pull her up. She gasped freezing cold air, even as she heard the rumble of the wagon Joe was driving suddenly halt and his running footsteps on the muddy road as he returned. She looked up into strange eyes, scarcely able to see their depths in the heavy darkness. The stranger’s right arm was wrapped around the winter-bare branches of a low lying oak, while his left held Laureli fast.

“Are you all right, miss?”

His accent was distinctly English. She allowed him to pull her free of the current, her dress so heavy from the sudden, unexpected drenching that she almost could not find her footing. Just at that moment, Joe, puffing with exhaustion from his short run from the wagon, approached and literally snatched Laureli from the arms of the stranger.

“Miss Laureli... God...” Joe’s eyes turned accusingly to the unknown face. “What the hell were you doing in the middle of the road?”

Even as she shivered in the biting November cold, Laureli was able to give the young Englishman a smile. “Thank you. Mister...”

The tail, slim man tipped his hat. “Garrett, miss... Wynn Garrett.”

‘‘You saved my life.” The Englishman removed his long coat and wrapped it around her. “Thank you,” she again said, allowing Joe to hold her close as he attempted to coax her back to the wagon. “Is there anything I can do to repay you, Mr. Garrett?”

The Englishman smiled shyly. “I’ve been looking for work, miss. Do you know of any along the river?”

Laureli cut a look at Joe but Joe shook his head. She could see that, for some strange reason, Joe did not like the looks of the Englishman. But Laureli was in charge at Wildwood, not Joe Fuller. Thus, she replied, “There is a job at my ranch if you’re interested.”

Wynn Garrett slung a knapsack over his shoulder and trailed behind them. “Yes, thank you, miss. I do appreciate it.”

The Englishman hopped to the back of the wagon and Joe, seeing Laureli settle comfortably on the seat, then jumped up beside her. “I sure am sorry, miss,” Joe said again. “I could have caused you to be killed.”

Laureli touched his arm affectionately. “Look at the bright side,” she said quietly, so that only Joe would hear. “We have helped someone who needs help. After all, it is getting close to Christmas, a time for giving. Now, I’ll hear no more about it.”

They pulled up to the porch of Wildwood where Pietra, her arms flailing, worry pinching her rounded features into a mass of wrinkles, rushed down the steps to meet them. “Tia—Consuelo, they are on the way? The woman is having a bambino...” then Pietra saw Laureli’s wet, disheveled appearance. “Senorita... did you go swimming in this weather?”

Laureli’s graceful hand swept Wynn’s wet coat from her shoulders and she handed it back to him. “Thank you, sir, for the use of your coat.”

‘‘You’re welcome, ma’am.”

Laureli pointed across toward the barn and the lights of the bunkhouse just beyond. “If you’ll go to the bunkhouse and tell one of the men I sent you, they’ll see you settled in.”

Wynn Garrett’s frown was masked by the rain and the darkness, but still it did not go undetected by Laureli. “Ma’am, if you don’t mind, I’d prefer more private quarters... perhaps at your stable?”

Between Pietra’s continued fretting and the stare of the young Englishman she was taken off her guard. “Very well, there’s a small room at the back of the stable. You may make yourself comfortable there for the time being.” She watched him pull his coat across his slim shoulders and move into the darkness toward the stable. Then she turned her attentions to Pietra, remembering the

question Pietra had asked. “I am wet because I had a little accident. Don’t worry about it. Allow me to rush up to my bedchamber, dry off and change into dry clothing... then I shall protect you from this big, bad husband who has invaded the parlor!” Although she had spoken sharply, teasing affection had underlined her tone.

The worry stayed on Pietra’s face. Laureli briefly touched her hand to Pietra’s shoulder in a comforting gesture, then rushed into the foyer and up the stairs toward her bedchamber. She hurriedly removed her soggy clothing, dried off and changed into a light cotton dress. Pulling her still damp hair back into a comb she moved toward the muffled, painful cries of a woman who had been taken to the guest room.

Laureli was afraid, perhaps more afraid than Pietra. She had never been in the same house where a baby was being brought into the world. She had come back to Wildwood because Pietra did not want to be alone with the husband. Laureli sniffed indelicately. Pietra could be so irrational at times!

Despite her fear, Laureli could not bear the thought of the woman being alone. Thus, she approached the open door, then moved gingerly toward the woman, surprised to find her so young—no more than seventeen—her fingers and knuckles bared white as they hugged the iron rails of the headboard. Then those dark, tear-sheened eyes turned to the silent Laureli.

“Please... please... I hurt so.”

Suddenly, Laureli’s fear was gone. She knelt beside the girl, cooled a cloth in the basin Pietra had put beside the bed and tenderly wiped her forehead. ‘‘Don’t you fret now. We’ve sent for someone who will bring your baby into the world.” A thought came to Laureli. “Where is your husband?”

The girl’s mouth pressed into a thin line and the dark eyes slowly broke away from Laureli’s silent gaze.

“There’s a man downstairs,” Pietra offered in view of the girl’s silence. “He’s the one who brought her here.”

Laureli stood, tenderly touching the girl’s hairline as she did so. “Consuelo will be here in a bit. Will you stay with her while I talk to her husband?”

“Si... but she better not start that wailin’. An’ that bambino better stay where it is for now!”

Laureli left the room and quickly traversed the stairs. Joe Fuller stood in the foyer, awaiting further instructions. “Could you stay around until the women arrive?” she asked. It was merely a precaution. Should Tia and Consuelo both be away at other birthings, Joe could ride northward on the Brazos for Mrs. Parkinson, who also practiced midwifery.

“Sure, miss...I’ll just go out to the kitchen and see what Pietra has left lying

around."

"The girl's husband?" she questioned.

"In there," Joe replied, pointing to the parlor. Joe turned toward the kitchen, but immediately turned back. "About that man you just offered a job, miss..."

Laureli's hand went up, though it was without reprimand. "He saved my life, Joe. I know we did not need an extra hand, especially at this time of the year, but I owe him, and I would appreciate you finding a job for him, even if it is helping Manuel clean out the stables."

With that, Laureli sauntered toward the doorway of the darkened parlor. A flicker of flame remained in the hearth, yet did not afford enough fire to light the room. Then she saw, first the cuff of dark brown trousers, fagged, mud-encrusted boots—on her Oriental carpets, at that—and an oversized poncho. The man had not seen her enter.

Laureli crossed her arms and slowly approached him. Only when she was within touching distance did he come to his feet, and his features, caught in the triangle of light pouring from the foyer, were revealed for the first time.

The man held her look, transfixed. Laureli had never seen such eyes—gray-black, the pupils almost oblong—rather like black tears that could not be contained in their orbs as nature had intended. They were seductive eyes—truly, the most beautiful mirrors of the soul she had ever seen, and so complimentary to his thick, black hair that hung a little too low to his collar for neatness. Masculine good looks and a strong, firm jawline could not be hidden behind the shadow of a three-day-old beard. When she entered, he had been absently twirling his hat on his index finger, but now held it firmly beneath a very powerfully built arm. She noticed another odd thing about him: He wore his gun on the left side of his hip.

Court McKennon couldn't help but assess the slim, auburn-haired woman in the same way that she seemed to be assessing him. In his thirty-five years, he could not remember having seen so remarkable a woman outside his family, where all the women had been exemplary beauties. The woman who stood before him shone like a goddess suddenly dropped from heaven, her hair like the sunset on a summer day, her eyes like barely tinted crystals with depths so clear he was sure he could see into a soul that was pure and virginal. Her skin was like the smoothest porcelain, her feminine form beautifully outlined beneath the tight-bodiced gown—round hips, tiny waist, and ample chest, like soft mounds defying the lace of her gown to draw his attentions—enticingly. She was tall; he liked that in a woman.

"Sir..." she began, momentarily averting her eyes from his close scrutiny. "Tm afraid that in the hustle and bustle I have failed to learn your name.''

He bowed ever so slightly, taking her hand as he did so. ‘‘Court McKennon,’’ he replied in a husky, well-educated, but definably English accent. ‘‘I cannot thank you enough for the assistance you’ve given Ilona. And you are...”

Laureli had just been rescued from death by an Englishman. Therefore, she was surprised by the coincidence of meeting two such strangers in one evening. Both men seemed to possess a brilliant command of the English language. She wondered whether the Englishmen knew each other, and what they were doing in the state of Texas. But many foreigners were migrating into Texas, and it hardly seemed likely that a straggler on the road and the man standing before her, waiting for his wife to give birth to a child, would know each other. Thus, remembering his last words, she replied, “Laureli Cade,” then discreetly extracted her hand. “Sir, may I ask what has brought you to Wildwood with your woman, when there are so many settlements along the river?”

“Ilona... the baby,” he replied. “I didn’t fancy delivering the little rascal myself and decided to stop at the first place. This happened to be it. And...” His ample mouth favored her with a genuine smile. “I do appreciate your hospitality.”

‘‘Of course, we will do what we can. I’ve sent for a woman to deliver your wife’s child.”

Laureli couldn’t help but notice his sudden frown. He said nothing, but his mouth became a tight line, almost of frustration. “As I said, I do appreciate your help.” A wagon pulled up and immediately, Consuelo, her head covered by the thick shawl she wore even in the summer to hide prematurely thinning hair, entered the house and traversed the stairs, following the sounds of female whimpers.

“Where is Tia?” Laureli called to her from the door of the parlor.

“She is in bed with the bellyache,” Consuelo replied. “Do not worry—I do the birthings by myself quite often.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just be nearby,” Consuelo replied, “in case I should need something.”

When she moved back into the parlor, Court McKennon asked, “Could I have a word with you, ma’am?”

“Yes... of course.”

“I’ve committed myself to delivering a wagonload of surveying equipment to San Antonio from St. Louis, Miss Cade, and the delivery must be made by the end of the month. Needless to say, I’ve been slowed down by Ilona. You have a big estate here, and I’ve seen only one serving woman. I am wondering—” Surely, he had noticed the shocked look on Laureli’s face, yet he continued as though he had noticed no change in her expression. “I am wondering, miss, if you could offer Ilona a position here. I really cannot take care of her myself,

though I am very concerned for her safety and her happiness. You wouldn't have to pay her much, just food and board for her and her child. I have some money of my own—"

''My God!" Laureli's shock and disbelief could scarcely be contained. Her arms dropped; unconsciously, her hands became tight fists that certainly ached to make contact with that arrogantly smiling mouth. ''What are you saying, Mr. McKennon? You are abandoning your wife? You would put her into a serving position, simply because she has slowed down your travels?"

"You don't understand..."

"My God... does anything prickle your conscience?" Outraged, she drew her hands to her slim hips. "And I wonder why your wife has slowed down your travels? Of course, it couldn't be because she is bearing your child! And suppose I said no—that I could not offer her a position? Would you snatch her up from the birthing bed and try to pawn her off on some other unsuspecting citizen along the river? You are despicable! No! Worse than that! You are a disgrace to mankind!"

At some point during her barrage of insults, Court McKennon had crossed his arms and stood with his feet slightly apart in a careless stand. He had never seen such a wild array of expressions on so lovely a face. He had never seen so charming a woman with such fury darkening her crystal-blue eyes into wild black orbs. Perhaps he did owe her an explanation. But, although he deliberately did not show it, she had made him as mad as hell. He would not even dignify her insults by telling her that he did not deserve them. Thus, he mustered together as much calm as he could manage and replied, "Your housekeeper is getting on in years. Surely she could use a young woman like Ilona to assist her in her household duties. Ilona will be a good mother. The child will not cause any trouble." Her fury magnified by his calm assessment of her domestic requirements, Laureli turned and stormed from the room, refusing to give him an answer. But when he spoke, she halted, curious, despite her misgivings about his shortcomings, to hear what he had to say. ''You will give it some thought, won't you? In the meantime, if you don't mind, I'll wait here until the child comes."

''You do as you please!"

At eleven o'clock the following morning, the long-awaited wail of a newborn child greeted a weary audience. Although she had done nothing to assist in the birthing, Pietra, pleading exhaustion, had retired to bed in the early morning hours. Laureli had assisted in the birthing chamber and was noticeably awed by the new life that entered the world. Her face was as aglow as if the child had been her own. Ilona's labor had been a long, agonizing one, and the two women left to tend her had feared for both her life and the life of her child. But now the

very young mother rested in peaceful exhaustion with a plump, pink girl child nestled in the crook of her arm. “Please,” she whispered, “Will you send for Court?”

Derrick and Court McKennon had waited in the downstairs parlor during the long process. Neither was immediately aware of the weary Laureli’s approach until she delicately cleared her throat.

“Not that you’d be interested, Mr. McKennon, but you have a fine, healthy girl child.”

He ignored the cutting remark. “Ilona?”

“Not that you’d be interested in Ilona either, but she has come through just fine and is resting peacefully. The Lord only knows why, but she wants to see you. Upstairs, the second door on the right. By the way, Mr. McKennon...” He halted, but did not face her. “I am willing to allow Ilona and her child to stay with us for as long as she pleases,” she continued. “As for you, as soon as you have seen Ilona, I want you off my land. You have proven yourself to be an unworthy husband and father, and I see no reason why you should concern yourself with Ilona and the baby after you have left.”

Court McKennon, strangely, gave her no response. But his teeth were gritted so tightly that he felt pain in his jaw. Slowly, he began to ascend the stairs to the second floor of Wildwood.

Wearily, Laureli dropped to the settee beside Derrick and rested her forehead on her linked fingers. Aware of the tension hanging like vicious tentacles in the air, wrapping Laureli in their treacherous embrace. Derrick’s hand slid soothingly across her shoulders. ‘‘You were a little hard on him, don’t you think?”

“In view of the circumstances. Derrick, no, I don’t believe I was hard enough on him. I should have booted him out last night, when he made the announcement that he was abandoning his wife and child.”

In the dark silence of the night. Court McKennon had told Derrick Palmer many tales of his travels across America. But he had sworn Derrick to secrecy concerning certain aspects of their conversation. That was one thing Derrick did well: He never betrayed a confidence. Thus, he asked, “Pretty baby?” and chose at that very moment to honor Court McKennon’s request.

“Indeed, she is. Derrick... perhaps later you may see her, too. We must let the new mother rest for now.”

Having helped raise most of his ten siblings. Derrick was fond of children. He wanted very much to see the dear little girl Laureli and his mother had helped bring into the world.

Court McKennon and Consuelo exchanged a polite glance as Consuelo was leaving the room. Then, softly, so as not to startle mother and child, he closed the

door. He approached the bed and looked down on the lovely Ilona, her light brown hair in disarray about the pillow, her arm tucked very carefully around the pink newborn face half covered by a tiny hand. Then he knelt and tenderly smoothed the damp ringlets from Ilona's forehead and touched his lips there.

Ilona's eyes half opened. Seeing Court's face she smiled a proud, beaming smile. "Isn't she beautiful, Court?"

"As pretty as her mother," he whispered endearingly.

"What shall I name her, Court? I had thought, perhaps Sarah, after my mother, but I would really like for you to choose her name."

Court's face lit up as proudly as if that newborn baby girl were his own. He remembered the birth of another darling little baby girl, a remembrance that brought a moment of pain and longing to his firm masculine features. "I think Sarah is a beautiful name... and I think Elizabeth, after my mother. Henceforth, this new little one shall be called Sarah Elizabeth." The whisper of a masculine kiss touched little Sarah's forehead. "Welcome to the world, little one."

The tiniest frown suddenly clouded Ilona's happy face. "Court, I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't found me when my father died. My little Sarah Elizabeth has a beautiful name. On his deathbed my father forbade my claim to his surname—he never forgave me for the disgrace I brought to him."

Ilona had painfully told Court the story upon their first meeting. Being of the Pennsylvania Quakers, a devoutly religious group, Ilona's father had fled his lifelong home upon learning of his daughter's pregnancy, to save himself from falling in disgrace with his peers. He had become sick and died on the Santa Fe Trail, leaving the frail, unwed, and very pregnant girl to fend for herself. "It doesn't matter," Court replied. "As a gift to you on this very special day in your life, I give to you and your baby daughter my own name—McKennon—which you may keep until a man loves you enough to give you his own. Miss Cade believes I am your husband. You need tell her no differently until you choose to do so. She has graciously consented to your staying here and, I am sure, will pay you a small wage—"

"Here? In this beautiful house? I will live here?" Ilona could scarcely restrain the excitement in her voice. Only the exhaustion of the recent birth quietened her words. "My baby daughter and I will live here?"

"Yes," he replied, removing some money from his pocket and tucking it into her hand. "And I want you to have this, to buy the things you'll need for this little one.

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"Yes... you and I knew that I would, once I found a suitable home for you. But, I promise, before I move on, I will try to see you and the child once again."

Ilona smiled, then gently closed her eyes. She was very tired and in the moment that sleep claimed her, her fingers closed tightly over Court's. He waited a few moments, until he was sure she was asleep, before he gently extracted them. Moisture sheened his eyes. He had been through so, so much with the tragic young girl who had just become a mother.

Court McKennon went out to his wagon where it had remained in the circular drive. Someone had been kind enough to stable and feed his team for the night. He checked the surveying equipment he was delivering to San Antonio, then glanced toward the large barn and a side yard where his team of horses nibbled at fresh hay. A cold November wind blew, chilling his spine beneath his thick, dark poncho. He saw a young, scantily clad Mexican boy talking to a tall, thin man, point toward the back of the stable, then walk out into the sunlight alone. Seeing Court, the boy skipped toward him, ‘‘Want your horses now, mister? I bring... for only a peso."

Court slanted a look at the thin, dark face. "You hitch up my team, young fellow, and I'll give you two pesos."

Wearing her prettiest dress, a pale blue satin that her parents had sent her from Europe just three months ago, Laureli stepped out to the veranda, approached and looked down on Court McKennon. "What do you have in your wagon?" she asked, the question laced with sarcasm.

"Surveying equipment," he answered as though she were bothering him, although he couldn't help but notice her remarkable beauty.

"Oh, I see... I thought perhaps you had another pregnant wife to pawn off somewhere along the Brazos."

"If you don't mind," he replied, gritting his teeth so that he could attempt to control his temper, "I need to check my equipment."

"You take care to protect your equipment, I see," she taunted, watching him adjust the canvas coverings to keep out moisture. "It's a shame you don't treat your wife and child with the same respect."

Court's muscles tensed beneath the heavy poncho. Unconsciously, his grip tightened on the drawstrings he was securing to iron nails along the sides of the wagon. Then he calmly turned, approached the veranda and, without warning, roughly gripped Laureli's shoulders and dragged her across the veranda rail and a narrow row of hedge. She gave a small, pained cry, scarcely able to keep her footing as he held her firmly to him. "You have badgered and taunted me, Miss Cade," he replied in his crisp English accent. "Why don't you learn to keep your mouth shut when you don't know what you're talking about?" Retaining his firm grip, he bruisingly covered her mouth with his own, pinning her arms down so that she could not break loose. Then, with the same spur-of-the-moment haste

that he had kissed her, he released her, and was immediately compelled by the rage darkening her eyes to catch her wrist on its upward swing toward his face.

‘‘Why did you do that?” she demanded, her face outraged and crimson. She despised the fact that the musky aroma of him still assaulted her senses, overpowering the anger with an emotion so strong and intangible that she could not identify it. Her heart was aflutter, and her knees flaccid, weak things, like melted butter.

‘‘You’ve already got a nasty impression of me,” he replied, turning his back to resume his work. “Just thought I’d give you a nastier one.”

“You’re vile... despicable... a swine...”

“Insults! All you need to do now,” he replied in the same taunting tone, “is stamp your feet and pull your hair. That should give me a pretty good indication of your guileless immaturity.” Then he turned and his fingers gently bestowed a touch to her warm, flushed cheek, an unspoken apology for the kiss he had stolen in his moment of anger. “Now! You really must cease your reproach of my behavior—and the despicable shunting of my domestic responsibilities, and let me get back to my work. I must deliver this equipment to San Antonio, and then, God willing, I can fulfill other commitments and return to England...” He smiled a half-cocked, sarcastic smile. “Where real ladies reside.”

His insult cut her to the core. Laureli had always considered herself a lady, but Court McKennon made her feel common and brazen. “And don’t bother to drop in for a visit before you return to your true ladies in England!”

Only now did he turn to face her full. “I’ll bloody well do as I please. Miss Cade. I’ll visit Ilona whenever I please, and nothing you say or do will stop me. I can storm either your barrage of insults and threats, or a neat and tidy line of armed men to reach Ilona, if I choose to do so. So don’t set rules and restrictions for me! Now, if you don’t mind, the boy is coming with my horses, and I’ll be leaving.’’

Laureli did not appreciate his taunting dismissal. She gave a fierce “Harumph!” then lifted her satin skirts and reentered the house. But she did not retire to her bed, as her weary bones coaxed her to do. She stood at the parlor window until Court McKennon’s wagon disappeared into the wintry timberline toward the Brazos River.

The musky aroma of him still lingered in the parlor and on her clothing that had so roughly molded to his own. The fire of his unexpected kiss still flamed her lips, sending the very core of her existence into a torrid frenzy that made her cheeks pink with shame and embarrassment.

Why had that man—another woman’s husband—lit a fire beneath her that could not be quelled by common sense?

Human nature was a strange, if not alarming thing, betraying her heart's desire to despise Court McKennon.

She wanted to see him again, even if just to taunt and insult him.

Chapter Three

On Christmas Eve, scarcely a month after leaving Wildwood, Court McKennon delivered the wagonload of surveying equipment to the San Antonio warehouse and collected his wages. The job had been one of many he had taken on since arriving in America three years ago. He had been all over the world in the six years that he had left England, visiting only once since then, and now that he had reached what might possibly be the end of the line for him, he was not sure what to do next.

So, for the next year, he took on other odd jobs, leisured away the hours in between at the saloons, toured the famous Alamo where almost two hundred loyal Texans had died just twenty-one years before, and had visited distant relations in Gonzales—frequently referred to in England as the black sheep of the family. He had also visited most of the theaters in central Texas, which were a far cry from the elaborate theaters of Europe. He had kept busy and had not deviated from the mission he had begun seven years before. There were too many things he could not forget: too many faces, too many tears, and a vicious, groping emptiness in his heart that would never be forgotten. He had tried, but it had continued to consume him, body and soul, until nothing in the world was important anymore.

He was almost out of money. The tidy sum he had earned doing odd jobs around Texas would keep him going a few weeks longer. He refused to write to his family in England for additional funds because they had long ago ordered him to give up the hunt. But somewhere, someplace, he would find what he was looking for. He would not stop looking, not until all hope was gone, or until one or the other of them was dead. The man Court had been dogging for seven long years might, himself, be running out of places to hide.

Court had enjoyed the three years he had spent in America, despite the mission that had brought him here. He had found it vast and free, its people always ready to face a challenge, or move on to new lands in the West. He was fascinated by the many tribes of Indians and their vast cultures and differences. He had begun a notebook, sketching their manner of dress, trying, though hopelessly at times, to put their different languages into some semblance of written form. His saddlebags bulged with information he had accumulated both in Europe and America over the past seven years. But only one portfolio was important to him. It was titled simply C.I.D. Colleen, and that, alone, was what had kept him on the move these many years. He was like a man possessed.

Leaving one of the saloons he frequented in San Antonio, Court ambled lazily down the board-plank sidewalk toward the small, dark telegraph office. He sent a message to El Paso to confirm his reservation aboard the Butterfield stage for a trip he planned to make to California just after the new year. He then returned to the hotel for a couple hours' rest after a long, sleepless night. At dawn, he arose, refreshed, and toured among the small shops of San Antonio, where he purchased a porcelain baby doll in a white cotton gown, a garnet necklace, and a five-pound tin of rock candy. In the early afternoon, he rented a good riding horse and began the hundred mile trip to the Brazos River.

Come hell or high water, he would not be intimidated and run off the Wildwood estate by the fiery, blue-eyed Laureli Cade. He had intervened in the fate of the victimized Ilona, and he had every right to see her and her baby girl before he left for California. He had promised Ilona that he would see her again, and he would keep that promise.

As cold as it was that late December evening, Laureli sat in the enclosed garden and hugged her rabbit-fur coat to her slender frame. Pietra had a fire burning in every room of the house and it was stifling hot, as hot as the ovens blazing in the kitchen as they prepared tomorrow's Christmas feast. A big celebration was planned for Ilona's thirteen-month-old daughter, as well as for Consuelo's eight grandchildren. There would be a houseful at Wildwood tomorrow, with Poppy and Tia assuming the role of Laureli's parents for the day. It was the second Christmas without those two, dear people, and Laureli was very lonely for them.

Laureli knew her parents' trip had been taken for several reasons. Her mother had wanted to trace her English roots and to see Europe before she and Laureli's father were too old to enjoy such an excursion. But the most important reason—and Mariah Cade had made no bones about it before their departure—was that it was time for Laureli to learn to take on the responsibilities of running Wildwood, as Mariah had done at the same age. One day the large ranch would belong to Laureli and her brother, Timothy, and there were many, many things to be learned. Laureli had shown the marks of a frivolous,-carefree and often irresponsible young woman. The many aspects of operating the ranch and keeping it profitable had, thus far, been a valuable lesson for her. Like the fledgling coaxed from the nest by its mother,

Laureli was learning to fly on her own. And she didn't mind. Nothing had been more gratifying than running the ranch and being placed in a decision-making role. She felt that she had matured since her parents' departure.

They had kept in touch through letters and gifts as they continued to flirt with the history of Europe and its ancient cities. They were in Vienna now, and in a few weeks would travel on to Florence, Italy.

Laureli had been out of doors only a few minutes when she heard the French doors open. Momentarily, Ilona stood beside her. She had been a good friend this past year, and Laureli was glad to have her at Wildwood.

"I remember when the gardenias bloomed in September," Ilona reflected dreamily. "The garden was so beautiful then." Yes, it was.

''Miss Laureli... why are you out of doors on this cold evening?"

"Thinking," she replied quietly. "Just thinking, Ilona."

Ilona drew her thin shawl further about her shoulders. "It's a bit cool to be out here," she said, sitting beside Laureli on the iron bench. Laureli's cool eyes met her brown ones. Ilona had grown to recognize the disapproval in those strangely pale eyes. "I know... Who am I to tell you what to do?" she continued, shrugging. "It's just that you've been so quiet these past few days and have spent entirely too much time away from the warmth of the house."

Suddenly, Laureli's hand left the warm folds of her coat and settled lightly on Ilona's wrist. "You are my friend, Ilona. Whatever is on your mind, I want you to freely relate it to me. I do not disapprove of your concern for me," she continued, aware that Ilona had misread her look. "It's Christmas... I'm just very lonely for my parents."

"At this very special time. Miss Laureli, I get very lonely for my father," Ilona replied quietly.

Laureli could not hold back a look of surprise. This past year Ilona, whose mother had died in childbirth, had told her many things of her life growing up under the strict, religious teachings of her father. Laureli wondered how any girl, especially a sensitive girl like Ilona, could have brought any happy moments from so deprived a childhood. The human spirit was a strange thing, indeed. "You know, Ilona, you've spoken often of your father since you came to Wildwood, but never of your husband. Don't you ever think about him? Doesn't it bother you that he just abandoned you and little Sarah?"

Ilona had never gotten the courage to tell Laureli the truth about her relationship to Court McKennon. She had wanted to many times, but she was so afraid that the stigma of bastardy would be attached to her dear little Sarah. Thus, she had changed the subject when Court McKennon had been brought up, knowing that Laureli, thinking her pained by the thought of him, would not push the subject. "While he certainly must be discussed. Miss Laureli, it is something else that has brought me to the garden in search of you."

"What is it, Ilona?" The girl entwined her fingers through the strands of her straight brown hair. "Is something bothering you?"

"It's Derrick, miss."

"Derrick?" Flashes of remembrances invaded Laureli's thoughts. This past year

she had seen a bond develop between Derrick and the pretty serving girl who had been dumped on her doorsteps by an uncaring husband. She had seen teasing admiration between the two, seen them leave the house together and join hands when they thought no one was looking. Laureli had disapproved and tried to discourage it, but her efforts had been as elusive as the white stallion she wanted for her own. The very quiet Derrick had been at his happiest when he spent time with Ilona.

‘‘Yes,” Ilona gulped a deep breath. “Before the family arrives at Wildwood for the festivities, I must talk to you about Derrick.”

“What about him?” Laureli asked.

“Tomorrow, after the Christmas festivities have settled down, Derrick wishes to announce our plans to marry.”

Laureli came to her feet so quickly one might have thought she’d been shot. “What?” Her pale blue eyes were suddenly black, her cheeks suffused with color. “Ilona, that is impossible. You are already married. My God, Ilona, I know you are young—very young—”

“I am eighteen. Miss Laureli... old enough to know that I love Derrick and want to marry him.”

“That may very well be, but that is not what I was going to say. Need I remind you that you cannot have two husbands, Ilona?” A cold breeze suddenly whipped over the garden wall. Laureli breathed the cold air into burning hot lungs, then calmly returned to the bench beside Ilona. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

Soft brown eyes met questioning blue ones. “Yes, I understand,” Ilona replied, half hoarsely. She had wanted to have a discussion about Court McKennon for more than a year now. It was time to get the truth out in the open, especially now that a very important man had walked into her life and wanted to make her his wife. She loved the gentle-hearted Derrick, and she wanted no other man to be a father to her daughter. Thus, dropping her eyes from Laureli’s she calmly announced, “Court McKennon is not my husband, nor is he the father of my little girl.”

The unexpected news was slow in sinking in. A wild array of expressions flashed across her face, quickly becoming one emotion—shame—that settled in her gaze.

“Oh, my God...” Laureli would never forget that November evening, nor the cryptic, sarcastic way she had spoken to the man she had thought was Ilona’s husband. He had brought Ilona to Wildwood. It was only logical that she believe they were husband and wife. Suddenly, Laureli’s fingers rose to the younger woman’s chin, forcing her eyes to meet her own once again. ‘‘I believe you had

best tell me the whole story."

Ilona spoke quickly, again lowering her eyes when the shocked Laureli's fingers slipped away from her chin. She had to get it all out; about her father dragging her away from their home in Pennsylvania; of his sudden death on the Santa Fe Trail and Court McKennon coming along at just the right moment. If it hadn't been for Court she might have fallen prey to the elements, to Indians, or wild animals. Court had saved her life, and he had offered his surname to her and her newborn baby daughter when her father's dying breath had denied them his own.

When silence fell between them, Laureli sat in a guilt-ridden silence of her own. Ilona said nothing; it was just as well because Laureli was not sure she could come up with enough strength to answer her. She had treated Court McKennon so cruelly. She had accused him of running out on Ilona and the baby. She had thought him vile and disgraceful. But what he had done had been an act of humanity and kindness. He had done something very few men would have done. Oh, how could she have been so mean to him?

Then she remembered those gray-black eyes with their strange tear-shaped pupils. She remembered the way they had lowered to her tight bodice. She remembered his sarcastic smile and the outrageous way he had dragged her across the hedges and kissed her. No! No! He was no less vile than she had originally labeled him. He had deserved her wrath because he had allowed her to misunderstand the situation. He had silently laughed at her and had deliberately made a fool of her. She owed him nothing! Certainly not an apology!

Still, she could not help remembering the warmth of that stolen kiss, for she felt it now flooding her skin despite the December cold. She remembered the masculine smell of him, the hardness of his muscles beneath her clenching fingers. She remembered those outrageous crinkles at the corners of his eyes as he had tried not to mock her, but had succeeded in doing so anyway. She remembered his cool demeanor, the arrogance in his voice as he had answered her sarcastic questions about the contents of his wagon beneath its canvas cover.

"Well, Ilona," Laureli finally answered, patting her hand as she arose. "You have certainly enlightened me. Frankly, I am a little disappointed that you allowed me to go on with this misunderstanding."

Ilona, too, rose. "Please forgive me. My baby—my little girl—I didn't want you to think less of her because she has no father."

Surprised by the younger woman's words, Laureli pulled her into the embrace of her arms. "Oh, Ilona, what kind of monster do you think I am? I don't live in the Dark Ages. I understand that these things happen, and your little Sarah is as precious to me now as she has been since I first saw her."

“And me?” Ilona responded quietly. “Do you think less of me?”

“My dear friend...” Laureli drew slightly back and gave her a sad smile. “God brought you to Wildwood—you and your little Sarah. Because He knew no one would love you more than we do.”

“And you have loved me,” Ilona replied. “You have made me feel welcome... and special. I feel that I am part of your family.” Yet, in the same breath Ilona wanted to remind Laureli that it was Court McKennon, and not God, who had brought her to Wildwood. But she had a feeling Laureli might be suffering a bit of guilt about the way she had treated Court. Thus, she allowed herself to smile as she asked, ‘‘Will you now give Derrick and me your blessing, Miss Laureli? We do so love each other.”

Laureli hugged her tightly. ‘‘Oh, yes... yes, of course. I am so happy for you both, and Consuelo will be, also,” she continued, chuckling. “I believe Consuelo feared that her eldest son would never find a wife.”

“Then she will be happy with me as a daughter-in-law?” Ilona questioned.

“Consuelo loves everyone,” Laureli assured her. “Yes, she and Jessie will be very happy to have you in their family.” With an arm wrapped around each other’s waist, Laureli and Ilona returned to the house. “And I’ll say nothing until you and Derrick make your announcement tomorrow,” Laureli whispered.

They parted at the stairs. Ilona moved toward the kitchen where she had been helping with the baking, and Laureli slowly ascended the stairs toward her bedchamber. She could not forget Court McKennon’s angry gray-black eyes. She could not forget the tightly clenched jaw with its three-day shadow of a beard.

She could not forget the fire of that stolen kiss.

Court spent a cold Christmas Eve night camped against a butte. Coyotes howled against the moon, drawing closer and closer to where he tried to sleep. He had covered forty miles before nightfall and if he arose at dawn, he could make the rest of the journey by mid-afternoon.

In a moment of restlessness, when he had feared that his horse might become supper for the coyotes. Court had lain in his blanket roll thinking about the beautiful young mistress of Wildwood. He imagined that she would be furious when he showed up at Wildwood to visit Ilona and the baby, especially on Christmas Day! She had more or less ordered him to stay away from Ilona, even believing him to be Ilona’s husband. He could imagine no greater pleasure than in defying her. He remembered those cool pale-blue eyes, the crimson flush of high cheekbones, arrogantly tossed tresses of sunset-colored hair. He remembered their softness against his fingers as he had pulled her across the hedge. And in that moment, a vision flashed in the night—an illusion, he was sure. A white stallion whose radiance was like an apparition far, far away,

rearing on its hind legs as though it owned the wind and the world.

It was gone as quickly as it had appeared, and Court was sure he had imagined it. How could such a magnificent beast exist in this desolate emptiness? Thus, his thoughts returned to the beautiful, copper-tressed Laureli Cade.

Of course, he could not know what had transpired in the last year. He did not know if Ilona had told her new mistress the whole story, or whether Laureli Cade still believed him to be her husband. It really made no difference. Whether Ilona had set the matter straight or not, Laureli would certainly treat the kiss as a reason to dislike him.

Court pulled his hat lower on his forehead and crossed his arms at his chest. He chuckled as he remembered those vicious daggers shooting from her eyes. Compared to the wrath of so beautiful a woman, who could feel threatened by mere coyotes, or the apparition of a mighty white stallion?

The following morning he ate a light breakfast of dried beef and used the last of his coffee. The sky was gray-black and stormy, the horizon a brilliant, fiery red against the timberline. A bitter cold wind penetrated his thick poncho, prickling the tiny hairs at the back of his neck.

Before saddling his horse he bathed his face in a clear creek, worrying that the thin layer of water would ice over his features before he could wipe it off. Soon, with the sun ahead of him, he was once again moving toward the east and the large, rich estate on the Brazos River. Perhaps Laureli Cade would have forgiven his arrogance. After all, thirteen months had passed since that cool November evening that he had held the Texas beauty in his arms.

Christmas morning festivities began with a bang. All of Tia and Poppy's grandchildren scooted off to the corral to light fireworks. That, of course, sent the mares to the very back of the pastures, where they stood, stamping and snorting their indignation at the invasion of their private territory.

The aroma of stuffed turkeys and honey-glazed hams wafted in from the kitchen at the very back of the house. Pietra, with eyes in the back of her head, did not let the men sneak past her for samples of the meal that would be served, in her own words, "soon enough for you animals!" Teasing Pietra had become a way of life. She was a bit like the old rooster named Purgatory whom she had brought with her from Mexico, though, unlike the bird, Pietra merely puffed up and spurred with words rather than sharp talons.

At mid-morning the women eventually found a few moments of leisure in their busy cooking and baking schedule to spend some time in the parlor. Ilona had bundled up little Sarah and she had been taken out to the corral by one of the older children. Poppy, Pavina and Merita, two of Consuelo's daughters, supervised the shooting of fireworks to make sure that no harm came to the

children.

The women who had remained indoors had just settled down and were laughing over a bit of nonsensical gossip that they had heard only the day before when the foreman, Joe Fuller, rapped lightly at the foyer door and entered the parlor. “Miss Laureli, could I have a word with you?”

Laureli stood up from the divan and approached. “Certainly.” She turned to the women, saying, “I’ll return in a bit. Don’t let anything burn in the kitchens.”

Laureli accompanied the foreman into the large study. As she entered, she followed the kind, watchful eyes of Francisco Gomez, the former owner of Wildwood. His portrait had never been taken down, and she suspected that it never would. He had been one of her father’s closest friends.

“Miss Laureli...”

She turned only at the mention of her name. Joe Fuller was a short, burly man, with dark, thinning hair. He was gruff and coarse looking, but she had never met a kinder man outside her immediate family. Her father had trusted Joe to run the ranch in his absence. That, alone, spoke highly of his character. “Is there a problem, Joe?” she asked after a moment.

“It’s that man. Miss Laureli... Garrett. He’s been here more’n a year and he just ain’t workin’ out at all. I know you’re grateful that he saved your life, but he’s scared to death of the horses, and he thinks he’s too good to shovel manure in the stables. I’m wondering if we should get rid of him.”

“You told me he’s helped you keep up with the repairs on the ranch,” she reminded him.

“Yeah... but he always mashes his thumbs with the hammer, or gets mangled in the fence wire.”

True, the handsome, and very English Wynn Garrett had been somewhat of a dandy, with milk-white hands that had probably never done a day’s work, and a voice scarcely able to raise loudly enough to make the livestock move forward. Laureli, though, owed him her life, and despite Joe’s complaints of the last year, she did not feel that she had yet repaid the debt. Wynn was a recluse. He never engaged in the family gatherings, although the invitations were always extended. He did not attend the local barn dances, and he never strayed farther from Wildwood than the woodline surrounding the stable clearing.

“I know he’s a bit strange, Joe.” Laureli replied after a moment, “but couldn’t we give him other chores to do?”

“Lord, Miss Laureli, how can you trust a man with eyes like that?”

“That is unfair prejudice, Joe,” Laureli reminded him for, perhaps, the hundredth time. “It is not his fault that our good Lord could not decide what color his eyes should be and made one blue and one green. Actually, I think he’s

quite attractive. Now, I'm sure there are some chores—"

"What chores, miss?"

"He could milk the cows each morning."

"He's afraid of the cows."

"He could take the monthly run to San Antonio—"

"He can't drive a team."

"Then teach him."

"Like I said, he's afraid of the horses."

"Then how does he get about? Trains don't reach every destination, Joe."

"He doesn't mind the public coaches, as long as he can't see the horses."

Exasperated, Laureli merely threw herself into a side chair. Her slim fingers drew thoughtfully to her chin. "Tell me, then, what do we do with a man who's been here for more than a year? Do we just simply toss him out?" When Joe merely shrugged, Laureli asked, "In your opinion, is there anything he can do with any efficiency?"

"He can read and write, and recite every line that British fellow, Shakespeare, ever wrote. That's about all I can think of that he does with any competence."

Hearing the women stir in the parlor, possibly preparing to return to the kitchen, Laureli got to her feet. ''Well, perhaps after the holidays, I'll see if he might be able to keep the books for Wildwood. Lord knows, I don't like doing it myself. Surely, there is something he can do to earn his wages."

"Keepin' books," Joe said, tipping his hat as he prepared to leave, "might be all he can do around here. Unless, of course," he continued with a bit of mockery, "you want your ears full of that Shakespeare fellow."

With the problem of Wynn Garrett settled for the time being, Laureli returned to the kitchen where the women were carving the turkeys and hams, adding the garnishes and side dishes, and putting the pies in to bake. Her conversation with Joe had troubled her. Joe had never liked Wynn, though she had never understood why. Perhaps it was because he was British, and Joe just didn't care too much for foreigners—invaders, he had called them. But if Joe stopped to think for a moment, the Indians were the only true Americans. All the Anglos were invaders in the Americas.

Laureli had to agree with Joe about Wynn. He was not a typical fellow. He was, indeed, frightened of the horses, a phobia he had explained had been caused in childhood when he'd been backed into the corner of a stable by a frightened horse. It seemed sensible enough to Laureli. It also bothered Laureli that Wynn secluded himself from everyone, when it had been made known from the very beginning that the employees were considered part of the family.

So, while the women were preparing the long banquet table with their

Christmas dinner, Laureli pulled on a heavy cape and walked out to the large stable where

Wynn had a small room. She rapped lightly at the door and immediately heard, “Come in, Joe.”

Surprised to see his very lovely female employer rather than the foreman, Wynn Garrett, who had been lying on his bunk reading a book, came immediately to his feet. He hastily pulled on his boots, then fastened the buttons of his shirt. “Miss Laureli, forgive me. I didn’t know it was you.”

He was quite handsome, with honey-colored hair and kind though mismatched eyes. But Laureli noticed that Wynn always stood with his head slightly at an angle, so that a person might not notice offhand just how unusual his eyes were. His features were so perfect—almost effeminate—that they seemed to have been carved of the finest marble. He was tall and slim and he moved with the grace of a woman. Laureli had often wondered what had brought such a refined man to the savage wilderness of the Brazos.

“Forgive my intrusion, Wynn,” she apologized. “I thought perhaps you might change your mind and join the family for dinner.”

“I’d rather not,” he said and bowed out politely.

No one had really ever shown much of an interest in the reclusive young man. She had heard gossip on the river that he had once been in the theater. She’d also heard he’d traveled the many countries of Europe and Great Britain with a Gypsy caravan. But he had betrayed nothing of his past, except to admit that he had been born in England. Although he was tall and slim and hardly seemed strong at all, she had seen enormous strength in his hands. She had once seen him, single-handedly, lift a fully loaded wagon when a wheel Joe had been replacing had fallen, trapping his hand beneath. He seemed to be a kind, considerate man, but he always looked over his shoulder, as though he expected someone to be there. His suspicious nature had puzzled Laureli many times.

‘‘Well, then,” Laureli eventually replied, tucking her hands into the pockets of her cape, “I’ll have one of the women bring you a tray. I really do wish you would join us,” she added as one last entreaty.

“I’d rather not,” he replied, shrugging. “I don’t go in much for family gatherings.”

Laureli met his shy gaze. “You seem very lonely to me, Wynn.”

“Perhaps,” he replied, again shrugging. “But it is a self-imposed loneliness. It is the way I want to be.”

“But why, Wynn? You have such a pleasing way about you.

Wynn Garrett shrugged lightly. “You don’t know me, miss. It is better that I be alone. That way, I can’t hurt anybody.”

Laureli approached, started to touch his arm, but unexpectedly meeting a narrow, almost threatening gaze, discreetly drew back. “Very well, then. I shall not pester you about this. Just remember that if you should change your mind and join in the festivities, we will be more than happy to have you.” Then she lightly closed the door behind her. She did not see Wynn Garrett return to the small cot and sit down. She did not see him pull from the pocket of his shirt a thin, broken chain that a lady might once have worn, and the fine gold filigree watch that hung there, draped between Wynn Garrett’s slim fingers.

She did not see the tears of a man condemned by his own fear to a fate worse than death.

A life of loneliness; of always watching over his shoulder for the appearance of the persistent bounty hunter who had been dogging his trail for seven years.

Chapter Four

By mid-afternoon, the banquet tables were aclutter with the leftovers of the carefully prepared Christmas feast, and the parlor was littered with the wrappings of Christmas gifts. Everyone was laughing and playing and singing Christmas carols around the pianoforte; even old Pietra, who had always avoided her family. But she’d had her fair share of the Christmas sherry, and was enjoying more revelry than usual.

Thus, not one soul heard the approach of the man on the rented sorrel gelding as he rode up to the veranda of Wildwood. They were too engaged in their singing and playing, and in keeping the children out of mischief.

The happy voices from within the house made the shivering Court smile to himself, remembering the Christmases he had spent with his family in England. But it made him sad and homesick, too. Slowly, he dismounted from his horse. The boy, Manuel, wearing a new coat and shoes and carrying a Christmas gift not yet unwrapped, approached and took Court’s horse. The mongrel pup the lad had adopted walked faithfully at his side.

“Why aren’t you indoors with the family?” Court asked, frowning, thinking perhaps that the little servant had not been included in the festivities.

Manuel rubbed his stomach, and a very theatrical grimace pinched his features. “Too much food, senor.

Manuel have bad bellyache.”

“Well, you take my horse and tie him in the stables. Don’t worry about unsaddling and grooming him. I’ll do it myself later. You just go lie down and get rid of that bellyache.” Court gave the boy’s thick, dark hair an affectionate tousle.

“Gracias, senor.”

Court McKennon slowly mounted the steps to the house. Through the windows

he could see the family gathered around the piano. Suddenly, silence fell upon the gathering and Laureli Cade, her fingers linked before her, began to sing. Court stood, mesmerized by the God-given loveliness of her voice.

Court could not put one foot in front of the other. Although she had ended her song after only the third stanza, he could not take his eyes from her. He was sure he had listened to the melody of a songbird sent from heaven; sure that the ivory-skinned Laureli was like the virginal oleander suddenly rescued from its fate of nature's poison and blessed by the gift of song. A year ago, her last words to him had been like the venom of that beautiful flower, but now, her harmonious voice still filling his head, he was sure that he, too, had been blessed by the greatest treasure of all. He had never heard such a voice, clear and perfect, surely, a gift of God.

The flame of the hearth set her chestnut hair aglow; a brilliant blue gown covered her slender frame with rows and rows of lace beneath a massive overskirt as ivory as her complexion. Her cheeks were aflush with color, her eyes bright and smiling, her ample mouth pink and sensuous. Though the room was crowded with her family and friends, it was as though she were alone there awaiting someone... awaiting him. It was a ridiculous thought, but somehow it warmed him. In all his travels he had never met such a stunningly beautiful woman. Recovering his senses, he rapped lightly at the door.

When his rap was not noticed above the noise that suddenly erupted among the children, he rapped with more firmness. Momentarily, Pietra opened the door, immediately recognizing the man who had brought Ilona to the house more than a year before. She frowned; after all, he was a heartless scoundrel, and he had disrupted their happy Christmas festivities.

Poppy had noticed the disappearance of Jessie shortly before the singing had begun. He had waited a little while after Jessie rode off on his horse, then had saddled his own horse and ridden after him. He wasn't in a hurry because he knew where to find him. Every Christmas Day for almost twenty years Jessie had ridden out to the Brazos, had dismounted from his horse and stood solemnly on a small rise overlooking the river. Poppy had never disrupted the very strange ritual Jessie had engaged in each Christmas Day, but had remained in the darkness of the woodline and observed from a distance. As in the past, Jessie had taken a small shovel with him. He now stood on the crag, filling a hole with dirt. Sometimes he spent an hour, sometimes two, depending on how hard the earth was. Then he would pile rocks on top of the freshly laid earth.

Today was no different than any other Christmas Day. Jessie had vowed many years ago that he would never again mention Sam's name, but he had not promised him that he would not engage in this yearly ritual. So, once again,

Jessie's mind flew back to that cool February morning in 1836 when the wiry, bone-thin Sam had been given the duty of courier to deliver a message from Matthew Cade to Col. William Barrett Travis at the Alamo. Jessie, then only five years older than the sixteen-year-old Sam, had been working on the line cabin and had sent Sam back to Wildwood for extra supplies. In the meantime, Jessie had gone about other duties, mending fences and the like, waiting for Sam to return, and in the interim, poor, tragic Sam had been thrown from his horse. But it had been a bit of luck for Sam, because he had discovered the tunnel leading through the hill to the cavern where Jessie had, a year earlier, discovered the gold of Cortez. So Sam had given Matthew Cade's message to Jessie, telling him that he had been given the duty of carrying it to the Alamo. While Jessie was gone, Sam had tried to retrieve the gold by himself, so that he would not have to share it with his older friend. He had tied a long length of hemp rope to his ankle, securing it around one of his boots and had attempted to lower himself into the tunnel. But even his thin body had not fit in the hole and he had become wedged and unable to extract himself. Jessie, a loyal Texan, had delivered Matthew's message to Colonel Travis, and Colonel Travis had sent Jessie on another run just before the Mexican siege under the leadership of Santa Anna. After the slaughter at the Alamo, Jessie had spent a year as a prisoner of the Mexicans, until he and another man had escaped, and Jessie had managed to make his way back to Wildwood. There, he had learned that Sam had disappeared that same day they had been working on the line shack, and the curious Jessie had found his skeletal remains in the tunnel.

"Well, you've lost a lot of good years with a good family, my friend," Jessie whispered hoarsely. "I'd imagine your bones will never work down into the tunnel so that you can rest in your cavern of gold. But if I don't fill this hole up every year, someone is bound to discover what's left of you, and maybe even find your gold... somebody as greedy as you were." Jessie smiled, but it was a very sad smile. He remembered that in Sam's last months of life he had tried to be cordial and friendly.

But the greed had never left his heart, and that same greed had killed him. Jessie had first found the treasure of Cortez, only to lose it again. He imagined that in his dying moments, Sam must have watched the sunlight penetrate the swirling waters of the Brazos and fill the cavern where the gold of Cortez lay, undiscovered for three hundred years. How many days he had taken to die no one would ever know. And Jessie, true to his word, had never told the family of his discovery of Sam's body some eighteen months after the lad had disappeared. Jessie had promised never to mention him again, and he hadn't. Even over the years when the family had speculated as to Sam's whereabouts,

Jessie had kept his young friend's gruesome secret.

At the age of forty-four Jessie had retained his youthful good looks, though his short-cropped brown hair had turned the color of a pale gray autumn sky. He wore a neatly trimmed mustache, more to tease Consuelo than to enhance his good looks, because she always complained that it tickled when he kissed her. He dearly loved Consuelo. He had been a kind, faithful husband to her, and a good father to their ten children. It was strange though, that although the four eldest children were born of Consuelo and Clyber Raines, all eleven of their children were alike in personality and disposition. Derrick was the most sensitive, almost a carbon copy of Jessie at that age. At times it was hard for Jessie to believe that Derrick had not been born his own son.

Always, when he stood beside Sam's grave, Jessie thought of his own family. If Sam could have sacrificed the greed that molded his heart and soul and lived a decent life, thinking of others more than he thought of himself, he might today have a family as fine as Jessie's. They'd had a good life at Wildwood in those years long past, and at Poppy's Little Wildwood where Jessie and Consuelo had also made a home for their children. Sam could have had that, too.

But Sam had rejected all their efforts. He had rejected the efforts of Mariah Palmer to make him part of the family; he had rejected the efforts of her adoptive parents, William and Elsa, to treat him as their own son. He had rejected the efforts of Jessie to treat him as a brother. Sam had been the dark and brooding orphan who had spurned the efforts of everyone who had shown an interest in him.

It was a shame that Sam had died alone, and as tragically as he had.

But enough of brooding for another Christmas Day. The very solemn Jessie returned his hat to his head and turned his eyes to the gray-black afternoon. A storm brewed to the north; they were in for a cold, wet winter.

The new year would soon arrive, and Sam would spend another long year alone in his grave in the cavern of gold beneath the shore of the Brazos River. Jessie prayed that God had shown mercy to that wayward son of the earth. After all, heaven was supposed to be paved with gold. Sam would like that.

Pietra barred Court's entrance at the door. It was as though she, alone, had the right to send him away, without conferring with the mistress of the house. But Court stood steadfastly, holding the packages he had brought from San Antonio firmly beneath his poncho. Then his left hand rose, removed his hat, and he bowed politely to the elderly Mexican woman.

"I have come to visit Ilona and her child. Please, won't you announce me to the family?"

Pietra had no intention of returning his deferential request. She sniffed very

impolitely, then crossed her arms at her massive chest. “The family is enjoying the festivities of Christmas. Why do you not just go away and come later, when there is not so much bustle about the house.”

Just at that moment, noticing the chill that drifted in from the open door, Laureli approached. “Pietra, what are you—” Then she looked up and saw Court McKennon. Her eyes widened in disbelief; then pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and held it there for a moment. It was a habit she fell into when she was ashamed and confused. She did not even notice Pietra turn away and reenter the parlor to chastise the many children who had gathered noisily around the hearth.

But for Laureli there was no noise—just a deathly silence that had descended upon her and the tall, slim man who stood at the foyer door. She remembered mocking gray-black eyes, but now she saw only his blank stare. It was only when he shivered from the cold did she think to invite him in. “Please, won’t you join us, Mr. McKennon? Ilona will be so happy to see you.”

He said nothing, but entered the parlor. Laureli Cade was being much more cordial than he had expected. He surmised that Ilona had told her the story and that she now knew he had not abandoned a young wife and newborn child. Because the silence between them became somewhat intimidating. Court took the tin of hard candy from beneath his poncho and handed it to Laureli. “I brought this, in the event there would be children about on Christmas Day.”

Her gaze lowering, Laureli gave a small laugh. “There are always children—many children—during the Christmas season,” she replied, taking the tin. “Thank you for being so thoughtful.”

Just at that moment, Ilona, carrying her child, rushed into the parlor, and little Sarah soon found herself sandwiched between the two adults as Ilona hugged Court. “Oh, Court, Court, it is so wonderful to see you again. You are just in time—” Ilona turned and winked at Laureli, “to hear my—” The shy, freckle-faced Derrick entered the foyer and stood at the door. Ilona extended her hand to him and Derrick moved to her side. “I mean, to hear our—” she amended hastily, “announcement.”

As they all moved into the parlor. Court gave Sarah the doll he had brought for her and the small velvet box bearing the garnet necklace to Ilona. He was glad to see Ilona so happy, the baby so healthy, and he couldn’t help but see the aura of love as Ilona shared a brief look with Derrick. Thus, Court said to Derrick, who was surely planning to announce an engagement, and might, as many men did, suffer the ignorance of jealousy, “I hope you don’t mind the little gifts. Ilona and the child are very dear to me.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Derrick replied sincerely. “If it hadn’t been for you, I would not have Ilona and little Sarah to love right now.”

Laureli walked behind them, a little miffed that Court ignored her. She was accustomed to men doting over her, not ignoring her as though she did not exist. Court was busy engaging in small talk with Derrick and Ilona, and talking baby talk to the little girl who might never have been born had he not interceded in the fate of the unfairly castigated Ilona. Thus, Laureli, her feelings hurt, forced herself into the sidelines and soon mingled with the children. When Jessie returned, and Poppy a few minutes later, Consuelo spoke sternly, capturing the attentions of her grandchildren. Her grown children were already prepared for the announcement of Derrick and Ilona and sat patiently around the parlor.

"Children, be quiet and listen. Your Uncle Derrick has a very important announcement to make."

In the moments to follow, a very shy, stammering Derrick made his announcement. After congratulations and hugs were shared between them, the activities of the Christmas season soon festered into sibling rivalry and squabbles over the bits of leftover food.

Laureli had patiently allowed Court to visit with Ilona and Sarah, but she knew that she was duty-bound to offer her apologies. She was not sure how receptive he would be to them, but she owed the apologies, even if he chose to rebuff them altogether. She had not seen his gray-black eyes occasionally shift, cutting across the heads of the scampering children to rest on her lovely features with a rush of crimson color in her cheeks, on her auburn tresses that appeared etched with gold against the fire of the hearth. He was sensitive enough to know how she felt right now, but he was not so sure that he could readily accept her apologies without additional restitutions.

Perhaps he might have to require the warmth of a kiss, given readily this time, and not stolen.

At nightfall. Poppy and Jessie, their wives and children and grandchildren loaded up in the wagons with their Christmas treasures for the short trek to their homes at Little Wildwood and along the Brazos River. Having ridden over on horseback. Derrick delayed his departure so that he could spend some special moments with Ilona in the coolness of the morning room at the south wing of the house. Soon, though, farewells were said and Ilona retired to the bedchamber she shared with her little girl.

With the banquet tables cleared and put away for the time being, there was nothing left to be done in the house but prepare to retire. Laureli was a little dismayed at Court McKennon's aloofness. She heard his voice, the voice of Joe Fuller out on the veranda, and she got the distinct feeling that he did not intend to give her the opportunity to apologize for the misunderstanding.

Court, however, was looking forward to it. He had struck up a friendly

conversation with Wildwood's foreman and now stood at the veranda, watching the burly man move into the twilight darkness toward the long, low bunkhouse to the right of the stables. As Laureli had requested, Joe had offered him a bunk for the night so that he might be well rested for his return journey to San Antonio at morning's first light.

Laureli felt a trifle piqued. After all, not too long ago—thirteen months to be exact—Court McKennon had ruthlessly dragged her across the shrubbery surrounding the veranda and, menacingly crushing her to his muscular body, had stolen a kiss from her. It just didn't seem right that Court should have misplaced his priorities. Allowing her to apologize—indeed, for him to apologize, also, for his brutality—seemed much more important than the banter back and forth with Joe Fuller. All afternoon. Court had pretended that Laureli didn't even exist.

She had been watching out the parlor window when she saw Joe Fuller depart for the bunkhouse, leaving Court alone on the veranda. Grabbing her shawl from the divan where she had earlier dropped it, she hastily drew it across her shoulders and moved toward the veranda. She wasn't sure how she would begin her conversation with him, but good breeding and manners compelled her to make apologies where apologies were due. She had berated and chastised him for a wrongdoing, and she owed him so much now that she knew she had been ignorant of the facts. Of course, it had been partly his fault, but she could not remember a moment in her rage when he would have had time to reasonably argue.

Laureli slowed her pace as she reached the foyer. She feigned a yawn as she stepped out to the veranda, approached the steps and looked up at the blackness of the winter sky. She sighed dreamily, hoping that he would think that she was unaware that he, too, stood in the darkness of the veranda.

Court, however, had stood at an angle, which had allowed him to see the parlor draperies occasionally part. Aware that most of the family had departed for their homes, he knew that the snooper at the window was none other than the very beautiful Laureli Cade. At one particular moment, he had enjoyed the auburn sheen of her hair, caught suddenly by a moonbeam as it came from behind a dark thundercloud. Indeed, he was very well aware that she had been watching him for the past thirty minutes or so.

A very tense moment existed between them. Court's bold scrutiny openly betrayed his acknowledgement of her, but she continued to hold her pale blue eyes to the evening sky and pretend that she was alone. So, she wanted play games. Presently, Court turned, absently adjusted his poncho over his winter-cooled shoulders and approached her.

Laureli feigned startlement at this approach. She drew her hand to her slim

throat, as if a cry of fright sat menacingly there. “Why, Mr. McKennon,” she said in her sweetest voice, “you did so startle me.”

“Nonsense,” he responded, his voice mellow and quiet. “You were watching me through the window... waiting to catch me alone. So—now I am alone.” Even the twilight darkness did not hide the half grin with which he favored her. “What do you plan to do with me now, Miss Cade?”

Oh, he was an outrageous man! Crimson rose in Laureli’s cheeks, but she merely brushed at them, hoping he might think that a spray of mist had dared invade her face. “Perhaps I was waiting to catch you alone,” she quipped, her shoulders suddenly thrown back in an arrogant move. “Though the misunderstanding was as much your fault as mine, I believe that I do owe you an apology.”

“For what misunderstanding?” The crisp English accent was laced with sarcasm. He knew bloody well for what, but he rather enjoyed seeing her squirm. Even beneath the thin shawl, he could see the outline of a sensuous feminine form that made his body respond almost hungrily for her. After all, it had been a longtime since he had been with a woman. And certainly, never a woman like Laureli Cade.

“For that misunderstanding,” she replied, only now meeting his thunderous eyes with only the slightest glint of humor. “For allowing me to believe that Ilona was your wife, that you were abandoning her and placing her in servitude at the first homestead that would take her. It was a very cruel thing on your part to allow me to ramble on so.”

“I did it for her... to save her from disgrace.”

“And that was a very noble thing to do. Not many men would have done it.”

Only now did Court McKennon turn to her. She half expected his hands to dart out and capture her arms between his strong fingers, but he did not move. He did not like her use of the word ‘noble’ and mentally shunned it. He had been just a man doing a humane act. “Perhaps it was cruel of me not to clear up the misunderstanding,” he began after a moment, “but your rage made you so beautiful, and so sensuous, that I hated to see it end. To have defended myself against your accusations would only have denied me the pleasure of your most charming state of ire.”

Laureli was sure that all the blood in her body had risen to her cheeks. How outrageous he could be. She had thought Englishmen were supposed to be kind and gentle and charming, like Wynn Garrett. But Court McKennon was bold and rude and arrogant. “Well,” she sniffed, drawing cold air into her lungs. “You could have set the record straight. So...” Coyly, Laureli lowered her gaze, then slightly shuffled out with her foot. “Tell me, Mr. McKennon, what I can do to

make it up to you? Could I offer you lodging for the night?”

“Joe Fuller has already done that.”

“Could I offer you supper?”

“You have been more than hospitable. I believe my belly is as full as the little stable boy’s.”

“Then what can I do for you so that you will not think ill of me and harbor resentment at my rudeness?”

“You might begin by calling me Court. I do not like to be called Mr. McKennon.”

“Very well. And I do not like to be called Miss Cade.”

“Laureli, then. We have that issue straight.” She deliberately did not remind him of his past brutality, of the stolen kiss and his arms firmly pinioning her slim body against his own. Perhaps it was something he had done so often that he had already forgotten that she was merely one of the victims of his ruthless behavior.

But Court had not forgotten. Even now, thirteen months later, the memories of her sweet mouth against his own, of her slim body protesting the firm grip of his fingers, were so firmly branded in his heart that she was almost a part of him. Oh, how beautiful she had been, with the daggers of crystal-blue eyes slashing his arrogant gaze. It was a memory he cherished, a memory he wanted to repeat over and over again, until his body was too exhausted to move.

So, remembering her last question, and wanting only to see the beauty of her crimson cheeks, he very calmly replied, “If you really want to make up for your viciously wagging tongue, the taste of your wine-sweetened mouth might be a good beginning—”

Laureli sucked in a ragged breath, attempting to still the shock that rose within her. So, he had seen her through the draperies. He had seen her pour the last of the apricot wine into a goblet and enjoy its sweetness. Laureli did not want him to see that he had ruffled her feathers. “And you might as well ask for the moon,” she quipped, “because you would certainly have that wish granted first!”

Court shrugged playfully. “You asked me what I wanted.”

“Within reason... room... board... a fresh mount to return to San Antonio on. I certainly did not intend for you to insult me,” she replied, perplexed at the very idea of his boldness, yet certainly not repulsed by his request. “I shall now consider that my apology has been sufficient enough, since you cannot make a reasonable request of me.”

Court McKennon watched her intently, her profile dark against the scant light of the veranda, her tight bodice covered by the shawl, her chestnut tresses long and loose and disheveled. She was looking down, her full, sensual mouth now pinched into a tight line, the toe of her left slipper tap, tap, tapping methodically,

as if keeping rhythm to a song flowing though her mind. He knew that his very presence intimidated her, yet he felt that she would not willingly leave his company. Something compelled her to remain, just as it compelled his tired, aching body not to seek out that comfortable bunk Joe Fuller had offered him just a few moments ago.

Something magical, magnetic and tantalizing existed between them, and neither was willing to give in to the primal instinct each felt for the other.

Or so Laureli thought. Without any warning at all. Court McKennon's hands left the warmth of his poncho and gently turned her to him. "And now I owe you an apology. Miss Cade. I am merely playing with you. I do not intentionally make a bold request of you. This has been the most enjoyable Christmas I have had since leaving England, and I do not wish to dampen the day by leaving a nasty impression with you. Forgive my nonsensical sense of humor. Of course, I do not expect you to repay me with a kiss, though I would not shun it were it offered." Somewhere in the course of his speech, his hands had begun to gently caress her arms through the scant fabric of her blouse. "I know you are a lady, and I am the one who owes you an apology for our first visit. You had every right to assume that I was Ilona's husband, and I had no right to brutally mistreat you. I am the one who must humble myself. I am the one who owes you.

Oh, so tenderly, Laureli eased his hands from her arms. They were gentle hands, the kind of hands a woman might want wrapped around her on a cold night. She could imagine them awakening a very unnurtured longing inside her, loving her, giving pleasure in a way that she had never imagined. She could imagine them touching her in places that had never felt the caress of man, places that longed for the illusive fantasy of lovemaking. She could imagine—

Her eyes rose to his slightly narrowed ones. She was sure he had read her thoughts and might, even now, be making plans to make her dreams come true. So, just as the flattering hue of pink rose in her cheeks once again, she turned and fled into the parlor, closing the door with an earth-shaking jar—placing a barrier between herself and the man outside who might, somehow, still the painful beating of her heart.

Chapter Five

Laureli stood at the door, pressed so firmly against the hard, cold wood that she was almost sure a shovel could not have pried her away from it. She could hear Court McKennon's even breathing on the other side of that material barrier separating them, could almost detect the musky aroma of his manliness. Moments before, she had heard the muffled voices of Court McKennon and Joe Fuller through the thick walls of the parlor and knew that Court intended to ride out early in the morning. Suddenly, Laureli could not bear the thought of him

leaving. The past two years of her parents' absence from Wildwood had produced boredom, and men like Court McKennon seldom visited Wildwood. The only other cultured gentleman—and he was a strange one—was Wynn Garrett, who was not about to let another human being close enough to know him.

In a matter of minutes, Laureli heard his retreating footsteps. Something strange and intangible, surfacing from deep inside her, compelled her to open the door and flee after him. But she fought the urge and merely stood by the door for a few moments more, until she could no longer hear the sound of his long strides.

So, with the house in near darkness, the only light coming from a corridor lamp upstairs, Laureli slowly began to ascend the stairs to her bedchamber. Her heart was all aflutter, her thoughts in disarray inside her head, and she could scarcely find the strength to unfasten the stays of her gown and step out of her clothing. Unbeknownst to her, the heavy draperies had not been drawn over the flimsy under-curtains, and Court McKennon stood at the entrance to the bunkhouse, watching the silhouette of a most charming feminine form against the light of the second-floor chamber.

Laureli couldn't blame him for hating her. She had tried to apologize today, to be cordial and polite, and she had suggested to Joe that Court be offered a place to sleep for the night.

She had seen an almost teasing playfulness in Court's eyes when they had been together a while ago. She'd heard gentleness in his voice, though he tried to remain aloof. She'd seen a smile in his gray-black eyes, even as his mouth had pressed into a thin line that might have hinted at annoyance. She had seen calmness in his face, even as he had stood straight and stiff. She had seen admiration in his gaze, and she knew that she had returned it tenfold.

Momentarily, she stepped out of her undergarments and donned a comfortable flannel gown. The fire was burning down in the hearth, and she quickly snuffed the lamp and crawled beneath the great pile of blankets and quilts on her tester bed. She closed her eyes, but it was not blackness in her mind; she saw the smiling eyes of Court McKennon. She imagined his magnificent voice whispering endearments and it was her hairline against which his cheek rested, and her ear receiving the seductive beauty of those imaginary charms.

Wynn Garrett had enjoyed the tray of dinner Laureli had sent out to him. His hunger satisfied, he rested comfortably in his cot. A warm fire blazed in a coal stove and he sat forward, sweeping back his light-brown hair. He really didn't know why Laureli indulged his erratic moods. He had not been much of a ranch hand, and he knew that Joe had complained to Laureli earlier in the day. He had heard that he might be put to work after the new year, keeping the financial

ledgers for Wildwood. That would suit him perfectly. It would allow him his privacy and very little contact with the outside world. That was what he wanted.

Soon, he pulled on a warm shirt and went out to the stables, where the coal was kept in a large bin at the back entrance. It was then that he spied the black saddle thrown over a stall gate, with bulging saddlebags. He had seen the stranger ride in earlier; for a short visit he had been told by Joe. Why then would such a short trip necessitate overstuffed saddlebags? Wynn looked around quickly. At the moment, no one was about, and he set the coal bucket down and began rifling through the saddlebags.

Then he found it: that dreaded monster that had been dogging his trail for seven long years. He found the portfolio entitled C.I.D. Colleen, and his heart suddenly ceased to beat. He was well aware of the initials: Criminal Investigation Division. The man who had ridden into Wildwood earlier that afternoon for a mere Christmas visit had to be a detective of Scotland Yard. What a small world it was! Although the detective was unaware of it at the time, his persistence had paid off. He was within touching distance of his long-sought prey.

Wynn hurriedly straightened the contents of the saddlebags and forgot about the small bucket he had been about to fill with coal. He ran out the back entrance of the stable and, dropping to his knees, dug his fingernails into the hard winter-packed earth. Then, with his bleeding, trembling fingers, he dropped the filigree watch into the hole and covered it, pounding the dirt with his fist as though he intended to condemn the evidence of his association with Colleen to the very bowels of the earth. It was imperative that he find a way to get away from Wildwood.

Although Wynn was innocent, God forbid that the stranger learn who he was. God forbid that he should stay beyond his planned departure in the early morning hours. Unbeknownst to Wynn, the little stable boy had seen his strange behavior. He had seen the quiet Englishman dig the hole and bury the watch. Immediately after a visibly shaken Wynn Garrett had returned to his small room, Manuel dug up the small gold treasure and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. If the crazy Englishman did not want it, Manuel did. He had never owned such a treasure.

Forgetting the coal that he had wanted to add to his stove, Wynn returned to his small room at the back of the stables. He hugged his thin shirt to him, trembling with fear, his eyes darting to each dark corner as though he expected the tentacles of Justice to reach out and grab him into their realm. He was like a palsied man, shaking so violently that he was forced to stand against the wall to maintain his footing. His eyes were wide and filled with horror. His heart pounded so fiercely that he was sure it would beat out of his chest and hit the

wall in a bloody frenzy. He wanted to run, but he was afraid the stranger would see him. He wanted to crawl beneath the small cot that had afforded him many nights of restless sleep, but a small spark of manliness inside him would not allow such a cowardly alternative. So he stood there, trembling, his thoughts like madly splashing waves on a stormy sea. He tried to think rationally, but could not.

He was not sure how it happened, but somehow he stumbled and knocked over the small coal stove. Immediately, the hay covering the floor caught on fire. Only then did his mind seek reason. He grabbed what he thought was the ewer of water to extinguish the flames, but in his alarm, he instead had grabbed the large jar of lantern oil. The flammable liquid caused the fire to race up his trousers and shirt, which had been accidently doused with the oil. As his flesh burned he began to scream.

Little Manuel, who slept in the room just next door, was the first to sound the alarm. In a matter of moments, he was banging on the door of the bunkhouse just fifty feet from the stable. Pulling on trousers and boots as they exited, the men moved swiftly toward the stable. Their ears assailed by the piercing screams of the Englishman, they quickly grabbed him from the burning room. Quickly, Wynn Garrett's body, flaming from the lantern oil, was rolled in blankets. Then the other men released panic-strickened horses from their stalls and formed a relay team. Soon many buckets of water were moving toward the stable.

The lamps of the main house became visible one room at a time. Wearing their robes and slippers, the women were soon out helping the men extinguish the fire. Laureli was almost sick to her stomach when the blankets were removed from the moaning, scarcely conscious Wynn Garrett. The fire had burned his clothing away and appeared to have severely burned his legs. His face and torso were badly blistered, and burned material clawing to the wounds.

Laureli felt someone force himself past her, almost causing her to lose her footing. It was Court McKennon, dressed only in trousers and boots, and bare to the waist, like most of the men who had responded to the panic. He very gently covered the burned man and picked him up in his arms.

"He should be taken to the main house," Court said grimly. "And a doctor sent for."

"Yes, of course." Laureli could not prevent her tears.

With the fire being quickly contained behind them, she and Court moved toward the house. "There is one in Brazoria. Pietra..." she called to the aging servant, ''make sure none of the other men have been hurt."

Laureli had already decided that she would send for Dr. Solon Delano. Many years ago he had been her grandmother Elsa's treating physician in New York.

After his internship had ended, he had moved to Texas, for the reason, many suspected, that he had fallen madly, passionately in love with Laureli's mother and wanted simply to be near her. But these many years there had been nothing more between them than friendship, a friendship also shared with her father, Matthew. Solon had never hesitated to rush up from Brazoria when called on an emergency.

Joe had already ordered a man to saddle and ride for Brazoria. Solon Delano would waste no time in reaching Wildwood.

Wynn was taken to a small, clean servant's room beneath the stairs. Laureli was at odds. She had never tended wounds of so serious a nature and was not sure where to begin. "Court." His head turned as she spoke. "Will you be so kind as to ask one of the men to ride to Little Wildwood for Consuelo? Perhaps she will be able to help until the doctor arrives."

Court bowed perfunctorily. "Of course." He left the house hastily, and when he returned some moments later, he was more fully dressed. He wore a clean, beige shirt neatly tucked into his trousers. "Let me see if there is something I can do." Court leaned down and pulled back the blanket. The man was scarcely conscious. "Bring me a pot of boiled tea—very strong—for tannic acid; diluted alcohol, and a bit of butter mixed with honey." Laureli was quite surprised that he was so precise in his directions; that he actually seemed to know what he was talking about. She started to leave but his crisp voice called her back. "Oh, and bring me a pair of good scissors, a round-edged knife, and a pan of cold water. We have to get this burned material out of the wounds."

Laureli rushed to-and-fro, rounding up the supplies he had ordered, then returned to the room where Wynn lay. He had lost consciousness, and Court had succeeded in removing most of the large particles of burned clothing from the more serious wounds on his legs and chest. Laureli turned quickly away, embarrassed that Wynn was naked. Court did not attempt to cover him.

''I am sorry you are embarrassed," he said sincerely. "I cannot lower the blanket on the burns below his shoulders. It would cause excruciating pain. If you will bring me a light sheet and four sticks, about a foot high, I will form somewhat of a tent over him so that the sheet will not touch the wounds. Do you have the items I asked for?"

With her eyes turned away from the naked, prostrate man, Laureli set a tray on the small table. "I have almost everything. I have the water boiling for the tea. It should be ready about now."

While Laureli set about gathering the remaining items he needed, Court used the cold water to cleanse the wounds. His legs were certainly the most seriously burned. The man lying on the cot momentarily regained consciousness, and his

head moved. His eyes, when they opened, met Court's narrowed concerned ones. Simultaneously, both men's gazes met in horrifying recognition. Court's hand withdrew, and the pan of cold water was accidentally overturned on the floor. Court stood, meeting that blue and green gaze of pain, and clenched his hands into hard fists. Slowly, he backed toward the door, scarcely aware of Laureli, who had reentered.

"It is him," Court mumbled, his voice a scarcely audible whisper. "He is the one who—"

Laureli had never seen such a horrified look as the one she saw on Court's face. Then his expression slowly turned to disgust. Laureli, despite the nakedness of the injured man, constructed the sheet tent over his burned body herself. With his nudity covered, she turned to Court. "What is the matter? Why have you stopped tending him?"

"Because," he said, refusing to meet her gaze, "I would rather see him die."

Laureli sucked in a shocked breath. She could not believe what she had just heard. As far as she knew. Court and the injured man had never met. Why, then, was there such hostility in his voice, in his eyes, in his very stiff face as he continued to clench his hands. She was not only perplexed, but very angry. He looked as though he wanted to pounce and kill an unfortunate man who could not even defend himself. "Well, I think that is a stinking, rotten attitude, considering what this man has just gone through. Perhaps I was right in my initial assessment of you."

"Perhaps you were," he calmly replied. "But, by God, I swore to see that man dead."

"I want you to leave."

"I will never leave," he replied as calmly as possible, "as long as he is alive."

Laureli clicked her tongue in dismay. "You are so irrational, Court McKennon! I've brought all the things you've asked for. At least, tell me what to do with them."

"I'm sorry... I can't do that." But even as he spoke, he knew that, no matter what the man had done, he could not withhold the information that would relieve his suffering. Just as he was about to begin giving her the sequence of instructions, her eyes turned to him.

"You are the poorest excuse for a man that I have ever known." Just at that moment a wagon rumbled outside. Soon, Consuelo and Tia both entered the small sleeping chamber. "You can get out now, Mr. McKennon." Again, he bowed. "I will be just outside." "I'd rather you were out of the house," she sniffed, allowing room for Tia and Consuelo to begin caring for the injured man.

At that moment, Court chose to remove a very tattered document from his

pocket. “This is a warrant. Miss Cade, for the arrest of that man. There is no expiration date. If he lives, then I will take him into custody. If he dies, I will have to return to England with a notarized affidavit to that effect. Either way, I am here. And I have a right to be here.”

Laureli merely grabbed the warrant from his outstretched hand and quickly, irritatingly, looked over it. “This warrant is for a man named Bedford. This man’s name is Wynn Garrett. Besides, this is an English warrant. It has no effect in Texas.”

“But it has effect here. Miss Cade,” Court replied, mustering as much calm as possible as he placed his open palm over his chest, “in my heart, I will never be far from him.”

“You have the wrong man, Mr. McKennon.” Her anger had forced them back to the formality of mister and miss. Court only now noticed it and immediately remedied his own oversight. “Laureli, I don’t care what he calls himself. As an actor he called himself Gye Bedford. But, like me, he is a McKennon, unfortunately a very distant relation, and he is wanted in England for assaulting and raping a young woman.”

Laureli’s mouth pressed into a thin, angry line. Unconsciously, her hands balled into fists at her sides. She wanted to hit out at Court McKennon, to beat against his chest, which scarcely seemed to move beneath his long, even breaths. But she calmly fought the urge. She did not care what he said. The very gentle man who had been critically injured, and who lay on the small bed behind her, could not possible be a criminal. If it was her last mortal act, she would convince Court of that fact, and she would protect Wynn from his unreasonable vengeance.

But for the time being, she would have to utilize her resources at hand. “Very well, Mr. McKennon...” She spoke his name flippantly. “You remain at Wildwood against the will of its mistress. You guard this very innocent man, but I will employ every man at Wildwood to protect him from you. You will have to come up with indisputable proof that he is the man you are looking for before I will accept that he is who you say—”

“I have the proof,” he replied as calmly as possible, meeting the gleam of her pale blue eyes, “I have everything I need.”

“And in what capacity do you dog the man you know as Gye Bedford? What authority gives you the right?”

Court grimaced. What he was about to say had once been the truth, but it was no longer true. He did not usually tell lies, but he would consider this very small one a candidate for forgiveness at a later date. “Scotland Yard. Criminal Investigation Division. I get my authority from them.”

Laureli cut a brief look at the two women caring for the semiconscious man.

She then stepped into the corridor, crossed her arms and waited for Court to join her. “The man you know as Gye Bedford...”She did not lift her gaze. “How long have you been searching for him?” eleven years.

Her head snapped up. She was not very familiar with the workings of a criminal investigation division, or a police authority as large as Scotland Yard, but she was sure that they would not give one of their own men permanent leave to pursue one man, no matter what the crime. “Seven years,” she echoed. “Odd, sir, that you should be so obsessed that one case would take you away from your given occupation.”

“I have my reasons, Laureli.”

She was suddenly very curious. “The victim of this heinous act?”

“A seventeen-year-old woman,” he replied, a grimace hardening his jawline. “A beautiful young woman, Laureli, not so unlike yourself; full of life, and wanting only to enjoy that God-given life to the fullest. But that vile man not only assaulted her... he raped her in a whore’s parlor!”

“I told you!” she cut him off, turning away. “You must be mistaken! Wynn is a very quiet man... a learned man who bothers no one.”

“Tell me, Laureli,” Court spoke reasonably. “Does he speak with an English accent?”

She wanted to lie, to defend the man known to her as Wynn Garrett, but every man at Wildwood knew of Wynn’s origin. If she did lie to Court, he would merely interrogate the others at Wildwood. “Well, yes, he does. But there are many Englishmen migrating to Texas. There is a lot of land here, and its many resources—and beauty—draw its fair share of foreigners... not just the English.”

“And he has one green eye and one blue eye.”

Laureli shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve seen other people with eyes that were different colors.”

“How many times?”

Actually, it had been only once, almost five years ago. She had seen a little girl whose family’s wagon had broken an axle near the Brazos. The child’s eyes had been different colors of brown, one very dark, and one very light. Again, Laureli could not lie. “Only once,” she quietly replied. “But that still means nothing.”

“Will you then, allow me to remain at Wildwood, to present the proof contained in my portfolio—and if that is not enough—to extract a confession from him?”

It suddenly occurred to Laureli that Court had not told her in what capacity he sought the assailant of a young English woman. If he was still a detective with Scotland Yard, he would have said so, without hesitation. “Since I must assume you are disassociated from your employer, tell me, are you now conducting yourself in the capacity of a bounty hunter?” she asked.

Actually, after the first three years that he searched for the assailant and failed to find him, Scotland Yard had, indeed, officially terminated his employment, though they kept him in their personnel files as an unpaid employee. Therefore, one might consider him a bounty hunter, though his only reward would be justice served. “If you wish to call me that, I have no objections.”

Court was not like most of the bounty hunters she had met over the years; scraggly, unshaven men who spit curses and oaths with relative ease; men accustomed to shooting first, then asking questions later. She had seen the refinement in Court at their very first meeting. He did not meet either the physical or mental characteristics of a bounty hunter. ‘“I have no respect for bounty hunters,” Laureli eventually replied, lifting her chin somewhat haughtily.

‘‘It is one of those jobs, Laureli, that must be done. And until this vile man is brought to justice, my life serves no other purpose.”

He was adamant; indeed, he was a man possessed. It occurred to Laureli that surely there must be another reason—a much more personal reason for Court to have allowed this particular criminal case to haunt him. “What was the victim to you? A wife... a betrothed—”

“No,” he stated flatly. “I do not wish to discuss the case further with you.”

Piqued, feeling that she had a right to know, Laureli drew her hands to her slim hips. ‘‘You have intruded upon a very private day—a day reserved for family and friends—a day that has ended in tragedy. You say that a man—my employee—is the assailant of a young woman—and that you have been tracking him for seven years. Yet you say that it is none of my business.”

“I did not say that,” he argued quietly. “I said that I did not wish to discuss the case further.”

Suddenly, their voices could barely be heard above the thunder of a sudden storm rolling over Wildwood, its sporadic tremors visibly shaking the house. She heard Pietra moving throughout the house, checking to be sure that the children had not opened windows earlier in the day. As Laureli held Court’s gaze, transfixed, a loud crack of thunder assailed the heavens, and almost immediately Joe appeared in the corridor.

“Miss Laureli—” Only now did Laureli cut her angry gaze from Court’s passive, yet implacable features. “I’ve heard three warning shots. The storm has stampeded the cattle on the north ranges.”

There were over a thousand head of cattle on those ranges. Laureli felt panic rise within her. In the last stampede they had lost almost half the herd to rustlers, and Wildwood could not afford such a loss so soon after the last. “Get all the men together,” she replied, approaching Joe. Then in a voice that only Joe could hear: “Ask Mr. McKennon to assist in the roundup and leave two of your men

here, with orders to report to me as soon as the rest of you have ridden out."

Joe gave her a puzzled look. He never had any problems taking his orders from a woman, and though they seemed a little odd now, he did not question her. Thus, his eyes cut across Laureli's shoulder and he said to Court, "We could use every man, Mr. McKennon. I'd appreciate you joining us."

Court shot a brief look toward the small room where the injured man was being tended. It was certain that he would not be going anywhere for quite a while. Going on a cattle roundup was something he had not experienced, and might never again get the chance. "Very well," he replied. "I'll join you."

As Court started to step past Laureli he said, in a calm, yet threatening voice, ''I will he hack, Laureli.''

She lifted her pert chin. "Yes, I am sure that you will."

He stepped past her, hut turned hack when she called his name. ''Court... you are wrong about this man. He is not vicious. He is a kind and gentle man, and should not suffer prejudice and suspicion simply because he is something of a recluse. And there is nothing you can do to convince me that he could ever raise his hand to harm another human being."

Court did not respond, but approached Joe and accompanied him out of doors where the men were saddling their horse.

The brothers. Luck and Jan Walters, reported to Laureli as soon as the men rode out of Wildwood. Laureli had already filled the two women in on her plan and now relayed those same plans to the men Joe had left behind.

"Do you know the little cabin a couple miles from here that Clyber Raines lived in a long time ago?"

Jan, always the spokesman for the brothers, replied, "Yes, Miss Laureli, but it's overgrown... scarcely visible through the brambles and underbrush. You couldn't light a lamp in there and be able to see it from any distance."

"Yes, I know," she replied. "But there's a very narrow path that Poppy has kept cut to the main door of the cabin. The walls and windows are still intact, but the chimney stack has toppled. I want you to hastily construct a litter and take Mr. Garrett to the cabin. Consuelo will accompany you. I want you. Luck—" her gaze cut to the younger of the brothers "—to stay at the cabin with Consuelo, mend any cracked windows to keep out the cold, make sure there are no leaks in the roof, then clean the fireplace and divert the smoke into the underbrush, so that it cannot be detected from a distance. When that is done, get a good fire going. Under no circumstances are you to leave Consuelo and Mr. Garrett, and certainly, you are not to let anyone see you entering or leaving the cabin." Consuelo approached and stood silently beside her scheming godchild. "Jan, ride toward Brazoria and intercept Dr. Delano's buggy. Take him straight away to the

cabin, then bring his buggy back to Wildwood's stable. Tell him that I will see him there; that he is not to come to Wildwood.''

"But why, Miss—"

Laureli's hand went up. "There is no time to explain now, Jan. But it is imperative that this be done before the men return from the range. You are not to mention it to any of the other men, and especially to the man you saw ride into Wildwood today. Is that understood?"

"I see," Jan replied. "You don't want the stranger to know where Garrett is."

"Yes, but that is all I wish to explain about this incident, Jan. Please, do as I say, and I will explain later."

Half an hour later, the brothers returned with the litter. Then Jan returned to the stable and brought a wagon, covered with a thick sheet of canvas, up to the main entrance of the house. Within moments, the wagon moved along the muddy, rain-slashed roadways of Wildwood, toward the cabin to the north. Only when Laureli and Tia could no longer hear the creak of the wagon wheels through the thunderous rainstorm drenching Wildwood did Tia speak her mind.

"Suppose the Englisher is right about Mr. Garrett," she said to Laureli. "After all, one Englisher should pretty well know the habits of another Englisher."

"He cannot be. Wynn is a quiet, gentle man. He could never hurt anyone, especially a woman. And I will not allow Court to stand guard over him and intimidate him and possibly hamper his chances to survive this unfortunate accident."

"But suppose he is right about him." Tia reiterated.

Unintentionally, Laureli snapped at Tia. "He isn't! Court McKennon has been so long on the trail of his criminal that he sees everyone he meets as that person. He is a man possessed. He is a demon. I have to find some way to be rid of him. And he is not—" Laureli turned full to the aging Tia, "to ever know where we have taken Wynn. That is—" Laureli grimaced at the picture forming in her mind, "unless Wynn dies. Then Mr. McKennon can be advised of his death."

Tia merely shrugged. It had been such a lovely day. It was a shame it had to end on such a tragic note. And she certainly did not like the idea that Laureli might be harboring a criminal. If Wynn Garrett truly was Gye Bedford, then Tia, mentally begging God's forgiveness, prayed that he would die and end the obsessive search of the Englishman who had ridden into Wildwood that day. She prayed that God would forgive Laureli, too.

Chapter Six

Tia had several times clicked her tongue in gentle chastisement, infuriating Laureli. Thus, Laureli was almost relieved to see Tia, covered by a large canvas poncho, board the wagon with Little Wildwood's driver and return home.

Laureli was at odds. She was strangely attracted to Court, yet she loathed him at the same time. She wanted to get to know him better, yet she wanted him as far away from Wildwood as possible. Her thoughts were a mass of scattered confusions. A man had never affected her as Court had. After the stampede had been quelled and the cattle tamed on the range, he would return to Wildwood, expecting Wynn Garrett to be in the small room where he had left him. Suddenly, Laureli did not want him to know that she had instigated and put in effect the plan to protect Wynn. She would rather he believe that Wynn had simply arisen from the bed and fled Wildwood in the vicious storm. Unfortunately, though. Court was not stupid.

So, Laureli decided to place herself in a favorable light, before Court found out what she had done. Perhaps he would be impressed if he knew that she was willing to work as hard as the men in a sudden emergency. With the protective Pietra snuggled peacefully in her bed, Laureli tiptoed back to her chamber and donned a comfortable riding habit and boots. Taking a canvas poncho from a wooden peg at the back entrance of the house, she hurried out to the stable and saddled Belleza, her mare. The wind and the rain slashed against her tender flesh, and as she mounted the mare, the storm tore the hood of the poncho from her disheveled and suddenly very wet auburn tresses. But she cared not about the cold and the wind and the storm; she cared only about joining the men at the range and doing what she could to bring the expensive herd of Hereford cows under control before any were lost to the storm. Of all the men who would be on the roundup she hoped she would not confront her grandfather, Poppy, or her Uncle Jessie. Both would severely reprimand her and order her back to Wildwood and the protection of the house.

But Laureli had never been one to take orders. Even as a child she had defied the convention of obedient children and had been the one to step forward when an argument arose with a parent. She was the one who climbed to the top of the highest oak when her father forbade it, or stuck her hand, clutching at least two thick potholders, in the hot oven to remove the cornbread when her mother told her never to go near the oven. Laureli had not conformed to convention then; why should she do so now?

Fortunately, the first man she happened upon was Joe. He and several of the men were standing guard over most of the herd of Herefords and keeping them grouped in a large ravine. The rest of the men were still out on the range, trying to bring in the stragglers. Looking around, she did not see the tall, broad-shouldered Court and was a little disappointed. He must be out with the other men.

“What are you doing out, Miss Laureli?” Joe asked.

She was soaking wet, the poncho clinging to her lithe form. She may as well not have worn it because her clothing was wet clear through to her undergarments.

She could also feel the squeak of her socks in the very tips of her riding boots. She sneezed, and her wet hair flew across her shoulders in its long, tangled masses.

"I came to see if I could be of any help," she replied. "I see you've contained most of the herd."

"Most," Joe replied, easing his horse up beside her so that he could pull the hood back over her soaking head. "There's about a hundred head still out. We've counted seven dead."

"Not the bull?" Laureli inquired grimly, hoping that the expensive bull her father had purchased in San Antonio had not been among the dead.

"No, but the bull's still out, probably taking charge of the stragglers. The men will bring them in soon." The two horses stood steadfastly so that their riders could talk. "How's Garrett?"

"The most serious wounds are on his legs," Laureli replied. "I believe he'll make it, but there'll be scars."

"Yeah," Joe replied. "A shame. Wonder what happened out yonder where he sleeps?"

"I don't know. Perhaps a coal fell out onto the hay and caught fire."

"The place reeked of lamp oil," Joe said. "I know it wasn't deliberate. But I believe the dandy Englishman was careless."

Suddenly, lightning struck very close, like a mighty crash just beyond the ravine. The cattle stirred into action, but Laureli and the men, coaxing their own well-trained mounts into immediate action, were able to confine them. "I'd better stay and help out," Laureli offered, once she and Joe were able to regain close contact.

"And I think you'd best be getting to the house. Miss Laureli. Your father left a dozen men to look out for you, including me, and in that capacity, I order you back to the house. Just be thankful Poppy is still out bringing in the stragglers."

"But Joe..."

"No buts. Miss Laureli. Git, now... before I go searching for Poppy—"

Laureli reeled her mare about. "Come Belleza—" She favored Joe with a mischievous smile, yet still spoke to her horse. "That kind of threat will send your mistress hightailing for home."

Joe Fuller couldn't prevent his admiring glance as he watched Laureli Cade ease the mare into a steady lope. She was quite a woman. Nothing seemed to frighten her: not a storm, not stampeding cattle, not any of the usual things that

most women feared. She was like nothing he had ever seen.

Laureli's mare slipped on the slick red mud of the trail several times. It was all Laureli could do to keep the mare steady, and to keep her from panicking every time lightning lit the dark winter sky. She was freezing, a thin layer of ice covering the poncho and her hair. She had just reached the fork in the trail along the Brazos when the mare lost her footing and slipped, only briefly trapping Laureli's leg beneath her powerful body. But the panic-strickened mare merely rose to its feet and galloped toward Wildwood, leaving the unhurt and very muddy Laureli sitting in a puddle of water on the trail. She wanted to be angry but she could not. Actually, it was rather amusing, sitting in the mud and watching the rump of her favorite mount disappear into the woodline toward the safety of Wildwood.

She looked up the hill and saw, outlined against the purple of the storm, the small cabin that had once been her mother's sanctuary. Now used as a line shack by the men who tended the cattle, it had been kept in good order, and it would afford a comfortable place for Laureli to dry off. There was usually a large wooden trough of clean water built half in and half out of the cabin from which Laureli could fill a large tin tub kept at the cabin. She would then be able to bathe and clean and dry her clothing before she returned to Wildwood. She hoped that the men had thought to leave matches and firewood so that she could light a fire in the hearth. She did not relish the idea of an ice-cold bath.

Thus, Laureli clumsily got to her feet, feeling the sagging heaviness of the mud that clung to her clothing. She carefully made her way up the slick hillside until she stood outside the small cabin. It creaked on its hinges as she entered, and she was glad to find that it had been recently dusted. She hated spiders and their sticky webs. Groping in the darkness, she felt a pile of dry logs in the hearth, then felt along the mantel for the long tin box of matches and the stack of newspapers kept in a corner. It took about fifteen minutes to get the fire going well enough to alleviate the bitter coldness of the small cabin. She shivered violently and could not wait another minute to begin removing her filthy, wet clothing. Soon, she stood beside the hearth, covered only by a large woolen blanket, and began to fill the large tin tub with water from the trough. Although lye soap was in abundance in the cabin, Laureli searched for her own small tin of perfumed soaps, as well as the towels and washcloths, which were well stocked in a small cabinet in the corner. She arranged them neatly on the bench beside the tub. She did not light a lantern because the hearth afforded plenty of light for the small cabin. She looked at the door, wishing there was a way to secure the drop lock so that it could not be opened. But the cabin had to be accessible to the men who rode the ranges.

Soon, she poured a large black pot of boiling water into the tub and swirled the water until it had reached the desired temperature. After her bath she would clean her dirty clothing in the same water, and would have to wait until it had been dried by the heat of the hearth before she could dress and return to Wildwood afoot. She smiled to herself. Dry her clothes, indeed! The storm did not appear to be letting up at all, and if she returned to Wildwood dry she would have to weather the storm. She was not worried that her absence would alarm the men. They would probably be out all night, waiting out the storm to be sure the herd was not spooked again.

The water felt almost hot beneath her fingers, and Laureli casually allowed the woolen blanket to fall away. She stepped into the water and eased the length of her body under the water, leaving only her head and shoulders exposed. The water was deliciously warm, and she took her own lightly perfumed soap and washcloth and began rubbing her skin gently at first, then with a vengeance when an especially stubborn spot of red dirt clung to her sensitive thigh. Soon, the soap had a heady lather, and she rested her head back, allowing her hastily pinned-up hair to form a pillow at the back of her neck. She closed her eyes, not realizing how sleepy she was, and how exhausted the day's events had made her.

When the water began to turn cold she arose, quickly dried off and dropped her soiled clothing into the bathwater. The storm still raged outside, so she let her clothing soak and did not bother to cover herself. The cabin was almost hot, and she stood naked before the hearth. For the second time that night she had an unknown admirer, for Court, astride his horse, sat just outside the cabin, his approach undetected by the dreamy Laureli.

What Court saw through the muslin curtain covering the small window made his body ache, his muscles stiffen almost painfully. He had never seen such beauty—a tiny waist blooming into perfectly rounded hips, long, lithe legs so perfectly formed that he thought it a shame they must be hidden beneath heavy skirts. He saw feminine seduction through muslin curtains, felt his heart beat so madly that he wanted to crash the full weight of his horse's body through the cabin door. He sat astride his horse, mesmerized by her loveliness, by small, firm breasts turned youthfully upward, by a flat stomach that barely heaved beneath her gently drawn breaths. It surprised him that he felt no shame in spying upon her private moment, but he could not help himself. To deprive himself of this moment would not be natural. He was a man, after all, whose eyes beheld the grandest treasure of all.

He had been on his way back to Wildwood, to check on his prisoner, when he saw the lights of the small line cabin. He was glad now that he had been curious and had not merely ridden by. Presently, he dismounted his horse, even more

curious to see what she would do when he rapped on the door. But when he approached, he saw a long length of twine, with a smooth ring of wood tied to the end. He knew the twine, when pulled, would lift the inside lever. And that is exactly what he did.

Laureli, though, at the first sound of a man alighting a horse, had grabbed up the blanket and had it pulled snugly around her. Her instant fear was that the interloper was Johnny Raines, because this was something he would do. Thus, as her pale blue eyes watched the wooden lever slowly lift and the door open, allowing a cold burst of wind into the room, she was almost relieved to see Court standing there. Still, she would not allow him to see that she was relieved.

She puffed up like Pietra's angry rooster and closed the blanket firmly around her nakedness. "How dare you! Couldn't you have had the decency to knock?"

"I could have," he replied mockingly, ''but then I might not have caught you in this charming state of undress." His gaze drifted over the small comfortable room of the cabin, over the blazing hearth, at the mist forming at the windows caused by the coldness outside, at the large tin tub and her garments floating there, then back to the blanket-clothed Laureli Cade. "You know," he teased, almost affectionately, "I think I might just take that blanket from you."

With her eyes as round as china saucers, her fingers closed firmly over the edges of the blanket. "Y-you wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" As he spoke he moved stealthily toward her. "You have been, Laureli, what we might call in England, a tart, perhaps even a vixen. You certainly have not been cordial. You certainly have not been a lady. Therefore, why should I be a gentleman?"

Laureli was stunned by his words. He was, after all, little more than a stranger to her, a stranger with a very mysterious past, a stranger who had attached a cruel stigma to a very gentle man. Unconsciously, she began taking small steps backward, unaware that she was approaching the hearth. Suddenly, the edge of her blanket caught fire and Court's hand darted out, dragging her toward him so that he could stamp out the tiny flame with his wet boot. In the move, she had lost her footing and now lay sprawled across a small leather divan.

Although he stood menacingly above her, she felt unthreatened. Rather, she felt safe, protected, almost glad that she was not alone at the small line cabin up from the Brazos River. Since the cabin lay between the herd and Wildwood, he must have been returning to the ranch when he saw the lights of the cabin. Laureli realized then that it was imperative that she delay his return to Wildwood. She could not have him discovering too soon what she had done. Thus, she contained the anger that swelled within her like a treacherous, lethal thing. Slowly, she came to her feet and turned her back to him.

“I would hope, sir, that you’re gentleman enough not to contemplate taking my blanket from me.”

Court was suddenly suspicious of the sweetness in her voice. He never had the least intention of taking the blanket from her against her will. Of course, if she offered it—

As she watched with stunned disbelief. Court removed his poncho, then began unfastening the buttons of his shirt. She suddenly had a very sensuous view of his tanned chest, bared as he removed his shirt. “You don’t mind, do you,” he said quietly, “if I dry my own wet clothing?”

When he began unfastening his belt and the buttons of his trousers, a very crimson-cheeked Laureli pivoted sharply. “I—I don’t mind,” she responded weakly, pointing to the comer of the cabin. “There is another blanket, over there.”

“I don’t believe I need a blanket!”

She was blushing violently, her heart all aflutter, her knees suddenly so weak and flaccid that she was sure they would buckle and embarrass her. “I believe that you do!” she argued. “You can’t remain in this room with me stark naked!”

She heard his boots hit the floor with a dull thud. From the corner of her eye she saw his socks and trousers drop the length of his long legs. “Why not?” he asked. “It’s nice and cozy... much too cozy for a stuffy old blanket.”

She wanted to turn and argue with him, but she was quite alarmed at what she might view. Still, the thought occurred to her that he might not be that painful to look at. But the lady in her forced her to maintain her firm footing. “I really must insist that you cover yourself with a blanket.”

Court laughed. She heard him moving about, but she had closed her eyes tightly. She did not know what he was up to, but knew only that he did not approach her. Then she heard him laugh again. “I dare you, Laureli, to turn and look at me,” he said with a throaty chuckle.

“Don’t dare me! No man ever dares me!” She still had not opened her eyes.

“Well, I am daring you.”

“And you think that I won’t?”

“I think you’re a prude... that you wouldn’t dare turn and look at me!”

“Ooh!” Laureli’s fury could scarcely be contained. One childhood idiosyncrasy that had accompanied her into womanhood was that she could not stand to be dared. If he thought she wouldn’t turn and view him, naked, well, he had another think coming! Thus, mustering as much courage as could be summoned from the deepest recesses of her stubbornness, she pivoted sharply toward him.

He stood there, securely wrapped in a blanket similar to her own. The only parts of him showing were his feet and his body above the shoulders. He was

almost sure that he had seen disappointment in her look. Actually, a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders earlier in the evening. He had finally, after seven years, found the man he had been searching for, and he deserved these moments of insulting bantering and coy looks.

"Disappointed?" he asked.

"Quite to the contrary," she replied, miffed, hoping that he would believe the color rising in her cheeks was caused by the warmth of the hearth. "At least I know you are a gentleman. Tell me, why did you not return to Wildwood rather than riding up here?"

"I saw the light... curiosity, I suppose."

"And your prisoner? Don't you want to be near him at all times?"

"He is not going anywhere," Court responded with determination. "I won't lose him now."

That's what you think! Laureli thought. "Did you know I was up here?''

"I had an idea," he replied. "I saw where a horse had fallen on the trail, and I saw what the rain left of your bootsteps approaching the cabin. They were much too small to be a man's boots, and Joe had said you'd ridden out."

Suddenly, Laureli sputtered in outrage, "So you sought me out, did you? Knowing that I had been thrown by my horse and had sought the comfort of the line cabin!" Somewhere amidst her hastily spoken words. Court had turned away and was warming his hands at the hearth. "Don't you ignore me!" she ordered, approaching, her fingers clinging to the blanket as though it were her only protection from him. Indeed, perhaps it was.

"You know, Laureli..." He spoke as though they had known each other for years. "I never thought I could feel so good. I never thought my search would end. I thought I would trail that man until the breath had left my body—or his." Then Court turned to her, his tanned chest suddenly exposed by the slipping blanket. "I feel that in just a few short months I can pick up my life where it left off seven years ago and begin living it for myself again."

Lifting her chin, Laureli momentarily pressed her mouth into a thin line. "Why are you telling me this, knowing how fondly I feel for Wynn?"

"Because you are ignorant of him, Laureli. He is the man I have been seeking, and when we return to Wildwood, I will prove it to you. I have a portfolio full of evidence, as well as a sketch of him. If that doesn't convince you, then I will extract a confession from him."

"By force?"

"If necessary. And now—" Court's hands eased out and gently touched her shoulders. He wished the intimate contact was not separated by the woolen blanket that she held so firmly. "What can you and I do to entertain ourselves

until the storm is over?”

Little Manuel had finally slept off his fright of the fire and the bellyache he had suffered earlier in the day from eating too much food. His little mongrel pup now pawed at his blanket-covered form, wanting to be let out. Manuel sat up, rubbed his eyes, then looked at the homely spotted pup and tousled its head between its ears. “You are a little pest,” he said, speaking in English as Miss Laureli had suggested. “Come, I will take you out to do your business.”

Manuel always slept in his clothing, and now pulled on the new shoes he had received for Christmas. On the way out he saw Court’s saddlebags lying across the stall gate. One of the buckles was unfastened, and something shiny shone through a sheath of papers. As the pup ran to the outside of the stable, Manuel pulled the portfolio from the saddlebags, then sat against the stall gate and began going through it. He could not read English, so the papers meant nothing to him. But there was a daguerreotype of a very beautiful young woman, and her dark hair reminded him of his own dead mother. Many of the pages had letterheads engraved in gold, and Manuel thought they were very beautiful. Then he found a sketch, and though there was a slight difference, it looked very much like Senor Garrett. Manuel had befriended Wynn Garrett, and the little boy was one of the very few people Wynn had allowed into his quarters. Thus, Manuel felt that he had a right to the picture of his friend.

So, when the puppy returned from its trip to the woodline, Manuel decided that he would keep the portfolio. It was of rich, dark leather, and an oval brass plate in the center made it look very expensive. Manuel felt that this had been a very good day for him. He had gotten the treasures of Christmas gifts, the gold filigree watch that his friend, Wynn Garrett, had no longer wanted, and now he had a beautiful leather book with a picture that resembled his mother, and papers with fancy gold engravings on them. The nine-year-old boy remembered his earliest years in Mexico City and the expertise with which his father had taught him to steal. It had been the only way his family could survive in the poverty-stricken outskirts of Mexico City.

So Manuel thought nothing of taking the portfolio containing the papers. He did know what the letters C.I.D. Colleen meant; he knew only that they looked stunning engraved on the brass plate.

He would add the portfolio to his collection of treasures, which he kept beneath a loose board in the small room where he slept.

The little stable boy had no idea of the hell that would be raised by his very innocent, if not somewhat larcenous act.

The twinkle in Court’s gray-black eyes hinted that he was enjoying teasing Laureli. She met his gaze with haughty conviction, attempting to relay to him a

strength that would match his own. Actually, it was quite amusing that, beneath the blankets, they both stood naked, squaring off with each other like mortal enemies and daring the other to move.

The room began to cool off. Court, adjusting his blanket with amusing animation, threw a couple more logs on the fire, then sat on the corner of the leather divan. He patted the divan beside him and invited her to sit. “Come... I promise I will not ravish you.”

She did not want to appear weak and foolish in his eyes, nor to have him believe that she was afraid of him. Without hesitation, she took the seat beside him, then drew her bare feet beneath the blanket and brought them up to the divan. In the move, her damp hair brushed his bare shoulder and she immediately drew her fingers through it, bringing it back to her own covered shoulders. Their eyes met, their gazes held. Who would look away first?

Laureli certainly wouldn’t. She took the moment to study Court’s strong, lean features: the straight, classic nose and the slight flare of his nostrils, the hooded brown eyebrows over narrowed eyes that sometimes seemed gray, and at other times as black as wells. His thick black hair was still damp, and an unruly curl invaded his naturally tanned forehead. She wasn’t sure of his age, but she was sure he was in his thirties, certainly much older than she. He had a strong, square jawline, and she became aware that his teeth were clenching, outlining the firmness of his facial muscles.

“Do you like what you see?’’ Court asked, mockery lacing his strong English accent.

‘‘Actually,” she replied with a like mockery, “you aren’t so difficult to look at.”

Court smiled, betraying tiny lines at the edges of his eyes that twinkled like stars in a clear, velvet night. Laureli was suddenly very aware of their closeness, of his own scrutiny of her, of the attraction in his eyes that boldly, immodestly lowered, as though he imagined that he could see her most intimate flesh beneath the thick woolen blanket. “And you,” he replied after a moment, “aren’t so difficult to look at, either.”

Despite her determination that she would not be the first to glance away, Laureli cut her gaze to the hearth that glowed with renewed strength. The logs crackled, the glowing embers disappearing into the blackness of the chimney locked into her subconscious, possibly so that she would not have to think of the man who sat so closely to her. She felt that the embers had not only disappeared into the chimney, but had found their way into her abdomen, because a strange, exciting warmth filled her, surged through her veins as though they were Amazon rivers racing with warm, tropical waters. She felt the flutter of something strange and alien in her abdomen, rising, causing her chest to heave

beneath the blanket.

Just a few hours ago, Laureli had stolen away the prey that the mighty hunter. Court McKennon, had been trailing for seven years. In the morning, he might hate her. Could she bare his hatred—his loathing? For the first time in her life, Laureli felt a longing she had never felt before. She wanted to be with a man, fully and completely, not have only the memories of stolen kisses and the adolescent hugs she had shared with friends in the past. She wanted to know what it was like to be with a man—in that way—to have her body caressed and aroused and discovered, like virginal territory awaiting an explorer. She had waited a long, long time for the right man to awaken that hidden desire within her; so long, in fact, that she was afraid she would remain cold and sterile and empty. And with that thought, her eyes turned fully, sensually, to Court.

No words were spoken between them. His warm gaze indicated that he understood.

Although Laureli had rashly judged him earlier, she did not believe him to be a womanizer. He seemed the kind of man who would have to form a special bond to be with a woman, not just take her for the sake of lust. What was so different about him?

Oh, yes—that warming of his gray-black gaze. Laureli was well aware that he was more than willing to oblige so beautiful and sensuous a woman. Tenderly, he removed the blanket from her and drew her into the warmth of his own, feeling immediately the tantalizing, erotic, passion-sensitive flesh of a woman who had stolen his heart from the very first moment their eyes had met.

He had known that day that fate would draw them together like this—a man and a woman fulfilling each other’s needs in a world of fantasy that existed only for them.

There was no earth, no heaven, no atmosphere; only a molting hot, vast vortex that imprisoned their bodies, one against the other.

Chapter Seven

Laureli’s senses, reeling with erotic fantasies just moments ago, now returned to her as painfully as if her face had been slapped. She tried to pull out of his muscular embrace, to put distance between their bodies, which seemed to melt into each other’s. She felt the hardness of his masculine frame against her soft, pliable one, felt his massive chest beating plaintively against her firm breasts. Their gazes met, his warm and mellow, hers as hard and cold as the logs waiting to be put into the hearth.

“Let me go.”

“Why?” Court playfully shrugged his shoulders. “I did not invite you into the warmth of my blanket. You came on your own.”

“You did something to me...”

“What did I do? Am I a sorcerer, enchanting his victim before the sacrifice?”

Laureli tried to hold his gaze, but found herself cutting her eyes away from him, only to allow his warm, even breathing to entice her to look back to him. Was she trying to find a way out of the predicament she herself had created? Court was amused, even as his body longed—no, ached—for her. His grip tightened.

“Yes... yes, you did enchant me,” she responded after a moment. “It was not Laureli Cade who moved into the warmth of your blanket. It was the wanton tart you created with your sorcery!”

Court’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “Then send that wanton tart away,” he mused. “It is Laureli Cade, mistress of Wildwood, I want in my arms.”

Her hand scooted out, trying to retrieve her own blanket that had fallen to the floor, but she could not reach it. If she stretched too much further, she would expose parts of her body that she was not willing for him to see. And he had no intentions of turning his eyes, like any decent gentleman would. Rather, he released his grip so that she could leave the corners of his blanket to retrieve her own.

But Laureli did not move. “You are a filthy, lusting creature!” she spat at him. ‘‘You are like every other man—”

Rather than respond to her insults. Court’s hand eased to the back of her rain-dampened head. She did not move; indeed, she was too filled with anger to move so much as a muscle. As his ample mouth moved to touch hers in a gentle caress, she pressed her Ups into a thin line. But that did not stop him; the caresses of his mouth merely moved to the tiny dimple in her cheek, to her soft cheeks as flamingly beautiful as an uncontrolled fire on a far horizon, to each violet eyelid. Needless to say, when his mouth again sought hers, it was soft, yielding and so wondrously captivating that his tongue teased her playfully. Beneath the blanket they both continued to share, he felt her body, rigid just moments ago, melt against his slim, muscular frame.

Laureli’s senses reeled beneath his masterful caresses. She did, indeed, feel like the wanton tart she had moments ago told him that she was not. She wanted to feel the confident touch of his hands at her shoulders, feel the gentle palms cup her face and his kisses tantalize her willing mouth.

Instinctively, Laureli moved, easing her head backward so that his captivating mouth could trail kisses down her neck to the throbbing crevice below the slim column of her neck. She had continued to hold the blanket to her ample breasts, but now allowed her fingers to unclench, to expose passion-sensitive curves to his expert explorations. With his left hand firmly at the small of her back, he

drew her close to him, allowing the flat plane of her belly and her thighs to mold to his long frame, allowing her shapely legs to entwine among his muscular ones. She was wanton and reckless and desirous of the rapture that stirred within her, that brought a hot, flaming ember from deep within her abdomen to envelope her skin and draw him into its wondrously painful warmth.

"Laureli... Laureli... what is it you want of me?"

Her soaring senses were brought back to earth by his hoarse inquiry. She suddenly pulled away and her eyes, darkened by the passion that had wafted through her body, now lifted to his, which appeared the color of the thunderclouds that raged in the skies outside. "I don't know," she answered. Oh, but she did know. She wanted to know the fulfillment created by passion that could only be nurtured by a man and a woman, together. She wanted to know that cheeks turning crimson beneath a man's bold scrutiny could change into something much more tangible and intimate.

The illusion of a smile touched Court's mouth. "Are you open to suggestions?" he asked, aware, painfully, of the erotic nearness of her nakedness beneath the blanket they shared.

Laureli shrugged delicately, wanting to close the distance between them, but afraid of the hot fire that burned within her; a fire, caused by this man—almost a stranger to her—that would ignite the very core of her soul; a soul that had never enjoyed such glowing warmth.

When she did not respond. Court put the tiniest breath of space between them, and his eyes averted to the glowing fire in the hearth. Hellfire and damnation! he thought. Why did he have to be such a gentleman? A naked, and very enticing woman had scooted beneath a blanket with him in an equal state of undress, and all he could do at the moment was wonder what action to take next. He was hungry for a woman—no, not a woman—Laureli Cade. She had haunted his dreams every night since he had first seen her. Although she had smitten him with cruel, vicious, and untrue accusations, he had wanted only to feel the warmth of her body against his own. Perhaps that was why he had dragged her across the low shrubbery and stolen the kiss before she'd had time to react. Perhaps that was why, even now, he wanted her badly enough not to take her by force, but to entice her with something akin to indifference so that she would want him with an equal fervor—to provoke her stubborn will and, through human instinct, to move back into his hungry embrace.

God only knew why—because certainly he didn't know why—but Court leaned across Laureli's slim legs and picked up her blanket. He timidly held it out to her and she, with an arrogant thrust of her chin, took it from him.

So, she thought, he has only been toying with me, seeing how far I would allow

him to go. He did not really want her. He had probably had his fill of women all along his journey from San Antonio. He had been baiting her, attempting to prove that she was loose and wanton. She was annoyed that he should have felt the need. Suddenly, she was very angry at Belleza for running away and abandoning her on the rain-drenched trail. If the mare had been faithful, Laureli might not now be captivated by the embrace of the very handsome Court McKennon.

She had merely snatched the blanket from him and now quickly wrapped herself in it and stood. She deliberately turned her back to him and stood before the fire, then turned to the cold bathtub and started to sling her clothing through the water. But then she heard Court's low chuckle.

"All that activity, and you've going to lose that blanket." He grinned rakishly. "And I am waiting with baited breath."

Drawing herself erect, Laureli sniffed her indignation. "We'll just see that your lusting eyes don't enjoy the wishes of your black heart!"

Quickly, Laureli ducked behind a blanket drawn over a rope across one corner of the cabin. Court heard a rip and when, scarcely ten seconds later, she emerged, she had made a poncho of the blanket that very nearly covered her entire body. Only her feet and ankles were exposed. And, of course, he was disappointed. Still, he saw that she had torn the opening just a little too much and had been required to hold it together with one of the wooden clothespins from the blanket in the corner.

Grinning at having outsmarted him, Laureli again approached the tub, drew her garments through the water, squeezed them dry, then laid them across the sparse items of furnishings near the hearth. Without looking at him, but very aware that his eyes watched every move she made, she moved back to the hearth. Although the flames made her skin almost too hot to be bearable, she refused to move. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing that she was a bit miffed at his rejection of her.

Court, however, had certainly not rejected her and was not put off by her sudden aloofness. Something wonderful had almost happened between them, and something had been said to spoil the mood. He had felt the pulse racing through Laureli's body just as fiercely as it had raced through his own. He had felt her willing surrender, even as her senses had fought to return from that ethereal vortex far beyond the physical plane she shared with him. Court had never been embarrassed about his nakedness and now stood, leaving his blanket on the divan. Approaching her, he gently captured her blanket-clothed shoulders between his strong hands. Laureli felt the hardness of his manhood against her buttocks and, rather than be frightened by his masculinity, she was very

intrigued. She had never seen that very intimate part of a man, but she was too proud to open her pale blue eyes that were now tightly shut, lest he step in front of her, boldly naked as he was.

But he did not. He merely captured one of her earlobes between his teeth and teased it. He eased the auburn tresses up from her neck and gently kissed it. Then his hands eased beneath the blanket across her shoulders and his warm palms captured her breasts, giving them equal attention, massaging them between tender fingers, eliciting a scarcely audible moan, a tiny, ragged breath drawn delicately into her lungs. He felt the smooth, soft flesh become hard against his palms as he continued to massage her breasts in a circular motion. All the while, his mouth forged a trail along her hairline until, eventually, his mouth enticed hers to him once again.

"Let me see you," he whispered huskily. "Drop this offensive rag so that I may view the most beautiful feminine form anywhere on earth."

"How would you know?" she whispered.

"I saw you," he whispered in return. "Through the muslin curtains just moments ago."

"You spied on me?" It was not an accusation. Her voice did not rise above a whisper.

"Wouldn't I be a fool not to?"

"But I would think you'd want to get back to your prisoner. Why do you not get dressed—I am sure your clothing is dry by now—and return to Wildwood?"

"All I said, Bedford is not going anywhere."

Laureli closed her eyes in shame. Here she was, enjoying the hold caresses of his hands, the whisper of his loving kisses against her cheek, and knowing that she had deceived him. She was twenty-three years old, and it seemed that ail she had learned in those years was to be devious and conniving and judgmental. Perhaps that was why she had never enjoyed the pleasures only a man could give—a man as gentle and warm and compassionate as Court McKennon.

And because she knew that he would most certainly hate her in the morning, Laureli's fingers unclenched, and the blanket fell away from her slender form.

But the blanket had scarcely touched the floor before the hoofbeats of several horses reverberated in the storm outside. Simultaneously, Laureli and Court both grabbed up their separate blankets and covered themselves.

Just as they turned, a dark, hooded, and rain-drenched figure lifted the latch and stood in silhouette against the purple of the storm. A flash of alarm and fright cut between Laureli and the short, stocky man she immediately recognized as her grandfather Poppy. He stood there, his feet apart, slowly drawing his canvas coat hack from the gun he wore on his right hip.

“Laureli, what the hell’s going on here?” She had never heard such haughtiness in Poppy’s voice, free, even, of the English accent that had, over the years, eroded into the brogue of the Texas Brazos. It was threatening, almost lethal in its delivery.

“N-nothing, Poppy. I lost my horse on the trail and sought the comfort of the cabin until someone found Joe.”

Poppy’s pale blue, and very suspicious gaze cut to Court. “And you? What are you doing here?”

“I’m afraid Tm the one who found her.”

“Then why didn’t you just bring her home? Looks to me like something odd is going on here.”

Court drew quickly into his mental resources. In his normal occupation as a detective, he frequently had to fabricate explanations. “My horse appeared lame. I thought perhaps it had thrown a shoe. I came up here and found that Laureli had lost her horse on the trail. Since we had suffered similar fates, so to speak, like her, I was merely drying out my clothes. Then I was going to check the horse.”

Poppy yelled through the open door to one of the two men still mounted on their horses. “Jessie, check to see if Mr. McKennon’s horse is lame, or has thrown a shoe.”

Shuffling sounds were heard outside. Court deliberately did not look toward Laureli, but he knew her eyes were filled with terror. He had thought she and her grandfather were very close. Could she, indeed, be frightened of him, of what he might do if he even suspected what almost happened between them tonight?

Poppy’s hand rested lightly on his bolstered pistol. The silence was almost deadly until Jessie approached the door. “Yep, Mr. McKennon’s horse is missin’ a rear shoe.”

Court’s knees almost gave way from shock and disbelief. The horse had shown no lameness when he’d ridden up to the cabin and spied on the beautiful Laureli through the muslin curtains. It was ironic that one of his many lies had become a very convenient truth.

“See, what did I tell you?” Court managed weakly. “To have ridden the remainder of the way to Wildwood would have jeopardized the health of the animal. I believe what I did was sensible. Besides—” Only now did his gray-black gaze shift to Laureli. “Miss Cade needed some protection. It is not safe for a woman alone, especially at night and in a storm such as this.”

Poppy’s fingers closed firmly over the gun at his hip. “Did he violate you, Laureli?”

Laureli shared a very brief, but alarming look between Poppy and Court. “No... of course not—” She felt the color rising in her cheeks. “He was a perfect gentleman.”

“Then you get behind that curtain over there and put your clothes back on. Tm taking you home.’’

Before Laureli could snatch up her still wet clothing, Court said to Poppy, in a very matter-of-fact tone, “You didn’t ask me if she violated me.”

Laureli drew in a ragged breath. Her eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with the wrath of a thousand storms. “How dare you, Mr. McKennon? How dare you suggest that I would even think about seducing you!”

Her cheeks were crimson with rage, her body quaking with so much fury that she could scarcely maintain her footing. When she met Court’s humored gaze, she stamped her foot childishly and moved to the curtain at the corner of the cabin. With Poppy standing at the door, lightly turned away, Court retrieved his clothing and pulled them on. Behind the curtain, mumbled oaths could be heard, commingled with her movements as she hurriedly dressed. Court could imagine what she was saying about him.

Soon, she pulled the curtain back with a mighty sweep of her hand and moved

past the men, daring not to meet Court's gaze or her grandfather's. Jessie had remounted his horse and offered his hand to Laureli. Immediately, she was swept to the back of his saddle.

The rain had become a cold, heavy, foggy drizzle. Court started to take the reins of his horse, but Poppy, who had also remounted, held the reins steadfastly. "I don't care that the gelding is not one of Wildwood's. He is missing a shoe and I will not allow him to be ridden."

"Could I double with one of your men?" he asked, flipping his hat back from his head. He did not meet Laureli's almost deadly gaze.

Poppy was just about to answer, "Yes," when Laureli cut in.

"No... let him walk. Perhaps it will cool him off a bit and dismantle his vicious tongue."

Laureli was so angry that Poppy stopped to wonder if Court had, indeed, made an ungentlemanly advance toward his granddaughter. Perhaps she had said "no" simply to protect him. "Very well." Poppy turned his horse toward the rain-slicked trail leading down to the Brazos. "Enjoy your walk, Mr. McKennon."

Halfway down the trail, Laureli turned in the saddle to look at him regretfully. They had almost shared something beautiful and wonderful back there at the cabin. And because he had made a little joke, his punishment was to be left two miles from Wildwood without a horse.

Thus, she said to Poppy, "Perhaps we should offer him a ride."

"No," Poppy replied, nudging his mare ahead. "Let him walk. I don't like the way he was looking at you."

Court had not seen Laureli's look of regret. Beyond ten feet or so he was not able to see much more than the blurred forms of the horses disappearing toward the darkness of the timberline. The mist was heavy, and the drizzle was again becoming a light rain. He was not familiar with the territory. Although he had a general idea of where Wildwood lay, he was not willing to go afoot in the middle of the night. So, he reentered the small, sweltering cabin, added a few logs to the fire and removed his boots. He had just eased his slim frame to the comfortable cot when the rain began to pelt down. Momentarily, a tinkle echoed from the corner, and he realized that the rain dripping in from the roof was filling a large porcelain pan. Why hadn't he noticed the annoying drip earlier? Was it because the beauty of Laureli Cade had so mesmerized him that he was not even sure if it were night or day?

The aroma of her lingered on the linens of the small cot, like roses growing profusely along a garden wall. Actually, the aroma of her was all around the cabin, permeating his senses with the fantasy of her sensuality. He really had to stop baiting her into anger, demeaning her without reason. Tonight, had the fate

of her family not intervened, they might now be lying together, locked in a web of lovemaking—a man and a woman wondrously entwined, and sharing the most beautiful, fulfilling treasure the human spirit has to offer.

She and the men were probably, even now, pulling into the stables at Wildwood. She would be cold and shivering, alighting the horse and making quick progress to the warmth of the big house and its many hearths. And he was alone, enjoying this one small hearth and wishing she were here with him. He recalled once, in France, when he had lain in a delirious semi-coma suffering from pneumonia, scarcely aware of the Pennyroyal tea being poured down his throat, of the oil of cedar mixed with alcohol that had been massaged into his chest. He felt the same delirium now, with the haunting features of Laureli Cade etched into his brain, the spasms of his heart beating so furiously in his chest that he felt the laborious pain of his breathing. She excited him, thrilled him with her fiery rebellion, yet in the same moment intoxicated him with her exceptional loveliness.

Suddenly, a crack of lightning rent the air and an earth-shaking roll of thunder quaked the windows of the small cabin. In that moment, his senses came reeling back to him. His mind was so preoccupied with his desire for Laureli that he had momentarily forgotten what had brought him to this vast Texas plain with her rivers and settlements and Indian villages. He had forgotten the vile murderer who lay, writhing in pain and agony, on the small cot beneath the stairs at Wildwood. For the first time in seven years, the memory of Colleen was not a lethal poison in his heart, urging him to conquer the beast who had destroyed her.

His heart felt almost empty. The search for Colleen’s assailant had been his life’s blood, his only goal—his only reason to live—for these seven years. He had reached the end of the line.

But another treachery filled his heart now; the treachery of a woman who would be only too easy to love. Laureli Cade was now the poison that surged through his veins, compelling him to conquer, to take, with force, if necessary, the willing treasures of her youth and spirit.

His prey—Gye Bedford—was in his hands now. If he did not die from his wounds. Court would return him to the hangman’s noose at Newgate Prison.

If Bedford died. Court was not sure if England could recall its wayward son who had once been a detective of Scotland Yard. His heart had been stolen by a wild Texas beauty whose very image branded his soul.

Every part of his body betrayed its desire for her. Every part of his body berated him for the chance he had missed tonight to make her his own. Texas held the heart of the auburn-haired woman who was like no other on earth.

Court wanted her. She had now become his prey—his obsession.

With that thought, he fell asleep, allowing the alluring siren to lull him into a peaceful sleep, despite the renewed anger of the storm.

Court awoke with a start. He was sure he had heard the echo of a fast-moving horse approaching the cabin. But in this slippery red Texas mud it would be impossible for a horse to move so quickly. He arose, pulled on his boots and approached the cabin door. So! Laureli Cade, feeling the guilt of having left him without a horse, was returning. The wild prancing of the horse had become a slow lope, then a walk, and the horse halted just outside the cabin. When a moment of silence followed the approach of the horse, Court opened the door. He squinted in the darkness, then saw not Laureli Cade, but a white horse illuminated, almost hauntingly so, against the azure sky. A young man who appeared to be about sixteen years old sat atop a rare white stallion such as he had never seen before. The stallion was unbridled, no saddle or other leather bindings violating its massive, muscular frame. And the boy, strangely, appeared to be untouched by the rain, his hair appearing dry and lightly rustled by the wind. His eyes were like deep dark wells, seeing everything, yet seeing nothing at all.

Slowly, the cabin door closed behind Court, causing his heart to suddenly skip a beat. “Who are you?” he asked the slim, brown-haired boy. He was met only by a blank gaze. ‘‘What are you doing here?”

Only now did the boy smile. ‘‘I belong here,” he replied, his slim fingers entwined in the massive flowing mane of the stallion. “This is my home.”

“You mean the line cabin? I thought it belonged to Wildwood. I did not see you at the festivities today.”

Again, the boy smiled his haunting smile. “I am alone, except for the stallion,” he replied, his voice like a whisper on the wind. “We will always be together, he and I.”

“Do you wish to come inside and warm yourself at the hearth?”

“No, that is not necessary.”

“Then what do you want?”

The stallion stamped his massive, unshod hoof, as though he were ready to take flight into the thunderous sky. “I want you to give Laureli a message for me.”

“I will be happy to do so,” Court replied evenly. “Tell her to forget about the stallion. He is mine.” Court gently shrugged his broad shoulders. “I’ll happily give her the message. Might I tell her your name?”

“Sam...” he replied. “She will know who I am.”

Court cut his eyes for the briefest of moments to seek out the cord that would open the latch inside the cabin door. When he returned his eyes to the boy and

the stallion, both had disappeared, just as though they had been sucked into the bowels of the earth.

Court gulped a long, steady breath, absently lifted the latch and stepped back into the cabin.

What a strange, quiet-spoken boy. What could be so important that he would feel compelled to get a message to Laureli on a night like this? And why hadn't he taken the message to her himself? Indeed, how had the strange boy even known that Court would be returning to Wildwood?

As Court resettled on the comfortable cot and pulled up the blanket, he closed his eyes, trying not to think about the boy and the wild white stallion that had been tamed by a mere boy. He had heard of the stallion's reputation along the Brazos and the desire of every mortal being to own it.

He had even heard that Laureli had offered a reward of five thousand dollars to any man who would bring her the white stallion.

Strange that she, a lifelong resident of the Brazos, did not know that a boy named Sam owned the illusive white stallion.

Tucking his linked fingers beneath his head. Court fell asleep and did not awaken until the hours of dawn, when the fire had burned down in the hearth, leaving a deathly chill hanging in the enclosed air of the cabin.

It was time to return to Wildwood on foot, take control of his prisoner if, in fact, he had lived through the night, and give Laureli the message the boy had given her last evening.

As short-tempered as Court could be at times, he was surprised that he was not angry with Laureli. It was her own rashly spoken orders that had denied him a ride to Wildwood last evening. She herself had planted the suspicion in her grandfather's mind that, perhaps, something had happened between them.

God! How he wished that it had!

Chapter Eight

Solon Delano had come a long way in his relationship with the Cades of Texas, not only in time and distance, but in affections as well. Many years before he had treated Laureli's grandmother, Elsa, who had died following a very delicate surgery in New York, and he had moved to Brazoria three years afterward. Even after all these years he was still the only doctor in the small village on the Brazos, and although the local population kept him very busy, he never failed to answer a summons from Wildwood.

Thus, he made haste to Wildwood that late, stormy night, accompanying the courier who rode on horseback just ahead of him. He was surprised to have arrived at Wildwood, only to have his buggy stored in the stable and be taken by horseback to a small, abandoned cabin a couple of miles away. There he had

found a critically burned man being cared for by Consuelo Palmer and a young ranch hand making hasty repairs to the cabin.

Consuelo had stayed with him throughout the night, attending him as his nurse. She had advised Solon that Laureli would explain the reasons for their cabin hideaway, but well past midnight she still had not arrived. Consuelo admitted that she had not thought the man would live even this long, but Solon, after close examination, could see that the burns appeared much more serious than they actually were.

Time would fade the scars and they would hardly be noticeable, but for the time being, Wynn Garrett was in agonizing pain.

Immediately upon escorting Solon Delano to the small cabin, the ranch hand, Jan Walters, had returned the horses to Wildwood. Effectively, Solon was stranded with Consuelo and Wynn Garrett.

"I'd really like to know what is going on here," he remarked, leaning back after hours of cleaning and dressing the wounds.

Consuelo shrugged in her absent, naive way. "Laureli will tell you when she arrives."

Solon was exhausted. In just an hour or so dawn would splatter a cold, golden aura over the horizon. Since he had spent seventeen hours the night before with a young woman giving birth to her first child, he had not slept in two days. He had given Wynn Garrett a good dose of laudanum and he was, for the time being, resting beneath the sheet tent that covered his body. And that gave Solon, also, the opportunity to snatch a few moments of long-overdue sleep.

Laureli had somewhat of a dilemma on her hands. Since Poppy had personally escorted her back to Wildwood just past midnight, a thousand hours of thought had scattered through her brain in the few hours since she had arrived. There was no denying that she had wanted Court, and had wanted him badly. She had been so irrational in her desire for him that she had not remembered that he was a threat to Wildwood, and especially to the innocent young man who had kept to himself and bothered no one for the past year or so.

Laureli had many vices—and she was the first to admit it—but she had never been self-centered and self-serving. She could allow Court to stay on at Wildwood—so that she could be with him and, perhaps, form an intimate bond with the first and only man who had so affected her—yet she knew that he was a constant threat to Wynn. The most logical option was to send him away. In those few hours that she paced back and forth in her bedchamber, she knew what she had to do. She had enough sense to know that Court was not stupid and would not endanger his life to take one badly injured, and perhaps dying, man into custody. Thus, when Manuel arrived at the house for his breakfast shortly after

dawn, she sent him to the bunkhouse for Joe.

Laureli was sitting in the morning room, shivering in the cold that penetrated the many windows, hugging her shawl to her slim shoulders and fighting back tears. That was how Joe found her.

Immediately upon seeing the tall, burly foreman, she sniffed back her tears and composed herself. ‘‘Sit, please, Joe... would you care for some coffee?”

“Just had a cup,” he replied, sitting on a rattan settee across from the identical one she enjoyed. “The lad said you sent for me.”

Laureli breathed deeply. “Last night, we—Poppy and Jessie and I—left Court McKennon sleeping up at the line cabin above the Brazos.”

“So I heard,” Joe replied matter-of-factly.

“We cannot allow him to stay at Wildwood, Joe. I want you to have his horse reshod—”

“Already done. Miss Laureli.”

“I don’t want any man at Wildwood to be implicated in a conspiracy to get rid of Mr. McKennon, so I’d appreciate your riding over to the Traylor place and getting Rollo’s boys to escort Mr. McKennon back to San Antonio. Tell them I’ll pay fifty dollars.”

“McKennon ain’t going to go willingly, miss, not without his prisoner.”

Laureli came to her feet, her fingers so tightly clenched that she felt pain shoot up her arms. “I know, Joe. He’ll have to be taken by force.”

‘‘By force, miss?” Joe certainly did not like the implication in her softly spoken words. He had taken to the friendly Englishman, and he didn’t relish the idea of driving him away by devious means. “Is it because of Garrett, or is there another reason?”

“Yes, of course, it’s because of Garrett!” Laureli snapped, turning forcefully toward Joe. “Court McKennon would attach the label of criminal to an innocent man. Suppose he ain’t innocent, miss?”

Laureli clicked her tongue in gentle chastisement. “Of course, he is innocent. Joe, you should know that. He’s bothered no one. He keeps to himself and—”

“Don’t do any damn work either,” Joe countered, also arising. “I say you let McKennon take Garrett. If he’s innocent, let it be proven proper—”

“No!” Laureli’s eyes became narrow and her mouth pressed tightly. Joe could see that she was trying to remain composed, and he was not making the job easy for her. “Please, Joe—” she continued, softening her voice almost persuasively. “Do as I ask. I want him escorted back to San Antonio, by force, if necessary...” She shuddered as she added, “Even if he must be tied hand and foot to his horse.”

“If that’s what you want, miss.” Joe turned back toward the door that would

take him outdoors, but slowly turned back. “Why don’t you just talk to McKennon—”

“No!” Laureli had not meant to snap with such ferocity. “I’m sorry Joe,” she apologized. “I can’t see him... I just simply can’t. Please, just do as I ask and—” Her eyes softened, and Joe saw the true feeling there. “He’s not to be hurt. For God’s sake, do not allow anyone to hurt him.”

“And if he returns to Wildwood?”

“Have him threatened, Joe. Tell him that if he is found on the grounds of Wildwood again, he is to be shot on sight. Of course, that will not happen, because I don’t believe Mr. McKennon is stupid.”

“Maybe not,” Joe replied in departing. “But he wants Garrett, and I think he’ll do anything to get him.”

Joe tipped his hat in respect of his employer, and Laureli watched him until he disappeared into the darkness of the stables. Moments later she saw Joe exit, riding his own horse and leading the horse that had brought Court to Wildwood only yesterday.

Tears sheened Laureli’s powder-blue eyes and a deep, foreboding emptiness filled her heart. As Joe disappeared from her sight, Laureli dropped her forehead to her crossed arms at the back of the settee and gently wept.

A year ago, Wynn had saved her life, and she felt compelled to return the favor. She could never believe that he had assaulted a woman with such gentle hands. She remembered how tenderly those same hands had held her arm as he’d pulled her from the currents of the Brazos. No—no, they could not have caused pain. Never, in a thousand years, could the soft-spoken Wynn hurt another human being.

Court was so obsessed with the criminal he had been dogging for seven years that, perhaps, he was tired of the futile search. He saw Wynn as his fugitive because he wanted to see him as such. He had pointed the accusing finger at the wrong man, and Laureli simply could not allow it.

But it was not Wynn’s fate that tore at Laureli’s conscience.

It was that fluttering, very recognizable pulsation of her heart when Court entered her mind; the river of fire that surged through her veins when she remembered how close their bodies had been, with nothing more than teasing, playful kisses and intimate caresses shared between them.

Although she knew she could never see him again, never allow him at Wildwood, she would feel the emptiness of his loss just as surely as if he had died.

Joe arrived at the Traylor property forty-five minutes later. Rollo Traylor, father of the clan, set down a jug of whiskey and ambled off the porch, readjusting his

suspenders as he did so. Joe dismounted.

"Rollo, your boys here?"

''Still sleepin','' he replied. ''Need 'em for a job?"

The Traylors had lost their entire herd in an anthrax epidemic on the journey down from St. Louis where they had been purchased at auction. It had virtually bankrupted the family, and for the past year the boys had hired out to other ranches when work was available.

"Yep," Joe replied. "I need your two boys to escort a Mr. McKennon back to San Antonio. Miss Cade will pay them when they return."

Rollo Traylor looked rather skeptical and raised his hand to stroke his unshaven chin. "This Mr. McKennon; he's not right in the head or somethin'? Can't find his own way?"

Quickly, Joe explained the situation. "Can I count on your boys to do the job?"

"Sure," Rollo Traylor replied. "But you tell Miss Laureli it'll cost her fifty dollars."

"She'll pay your price."

"That's fifty dollars... each, for my boys."

Joe pondered the matter for a moment. "Mighty steep, Rollo, but if that's your price, send your boys to Wildwood when they return."

Just at that moment, Johnny Raines, riding a big black mare, entered from the roadway. Even the cold winter wind seemed to avoid that black son of Satan, because, strangely, his coal-black hair did not rustle in the breeze. He sat, slumped over the saddle horn, grinning a very macabre grin. "Luke and Jack here, Rollo?" he asked.

Joe, anxious to put distance between himself and Johnny Raines, tipped his hat to Rollo. "You get that job done for me, Rollo. And don't forget, he's not to be hurt."

"The boys will get right to it. You say that fellow is at the line cabin near the river?"

Joe remounted his horse. "That's what I said... good day, Rollo."

"What's going on?" Johnny Raines asked, sweeping his unclean hair back under his hat.

"Joe's wantin' the boys to do a job for him. Luke can go, but Jack, he's sleepin' off a hangover."

Johnny flicked his hat with his middle finger. "I'll be glad to go with Luke. Just tell me what we need to do."

Although the cabin had been warm and comfortable. Court had spent a restless night. He had expected Laureli to have a change of heart and send a horse back for him. But she was more calloused than he had thought possible. Last night,

she had been warm and sensitive, and he was sure they might have made love had they not been interrupted by her family. But she had ridden back to Wildwood and had not cared one way or the other that he was alone without transportation and, it seemed, without his gun. He was not sure what had happened to it. He was sure that one of her family had slipped it out, leaving only the empty holster hanging at the edge of the leather settee. Then he remembered Poppy approaching the settee, and movements of his hands indicating that he might have taken the gun. Perhaps he had wanted to assure himself that Court would not venture out into the night without a weapon for protection. Without knowing that his assumptions were correct, Court realized he was grabbing at speculations. He did not want to believe that Laureli had taken it.

He washed his face in the tin tub that had, last evening, held Laureli's lovely, lithe form. The fragrance of her lingered in the cabin, in the towel with which she had dried herself, even in the lye soap with the faintest aroma of lavender. Like her mother before her, Laureli enjoyed the solitude of the small cabin—something that Joe had told him yesterday. It seemed only reasonable that she would leave things at the cabin for her personal use.

He had just combed his hair back and was pulling on his shirt when he heard the approach of several horses. He started to button his shirt and take up his poncho, but an unfamiliar voice called his name, as gruff and demanding as a bear disturbed from hibernation. Instinctively, Court looked toward his empty holster. Damn whoever had sabotaged his every move! Damn him for allowing it!

Court opened the door, his poncho dragging the ground, his hand rising to shield his eyes against the sun that rose in the east. He knew neither man sitting atop their horses. One was a dark-haired man, arrogant and cocky, with his wrists crossed on the pommel of his saddle. The other man stood slightly back, little more than a prepubescent boy. But Court recognized the rented gelding without a rider, and the absence of his saddlebags.

''What do you men want?" Court asked huskily, so aware of the threat he felt inside that his hand kept easing toward his left hip, meeting only the emptiness of his holster. "And what are you doing with my horse?"

''We're taking you back to San Antonio. We're your personal escort." Johnny Raines laughed with hoarse sarcasm. "Miss Laureli wants you off Wildwood, and she wants you off now."

"I'm not going anywhere," Court argued firmly. ''And no man—or woman—can force me to leave."

Suddenly, Court found himself looking down the barrel of a large caliber pistol.

The younger man, Luke Traylor, cut a look between the two men, then, with much less confidence, removed his own pistol and pointed it toward Court.

"You will go, mister... now you git on that horse and don't argue."

Court's hands hung loosely at his side. "I said I am not leaving."

The men had maneuvered their horses and, without being fully aware of it. Court had allowed them to cut him off from the cabin. Johnny Raines again laughed. ''Looks like we got us a troublemaker here, Luke. Remember that last fella—the greaser out of Brazoria—who couldn't keep his hands off your sister?"

"Johnny, no..." Panic rose in the voice of the younger man. "Miss Laureli won't like it."

"You just keep that gun aimed on the Englishman..." Johnny Raines reholstered his gun and, making sure that Luke was following his orders, dismounted from his horse and tied it to a winter-bare sapling beside the cabin. Court did not move a muscle as Luke Traylor aimed the pistol directly at his forehead. His eyes were fixed to that lethal thing that could snuff out his life in a mere second. But, from the corners of his eyes, he saw the dark-haired man move around his horse, then return, uncoiling a thin, braided horsewhip. "You know what we do to foreigners, mister, who don't get out of Texas when they're ordered?"

Watching Johnny Raines pop the whip with expertise, cleanly snapping off the winter-dead branches of the sapling. Court had a pretty good idea. But he was determined that he would not be forced off the ranch without custody of his prisoner. He had tracked him for seven years and nothing—not even the sting of a horsewhip—was going to deprive him of his just reward.

"You are not going to whip me," Court said, the confidence with which he spoke in his words, but not in his heart.

Without warning, the whip lashed out, catching Court across the shoulder. Instinctively, he released a harsh, angry groan and fell to one knee, clutching the fire of the wound. But just as quickly, he composed himself, rose to his feet and turned full to Johnny Raines. Already, blood from the single wound seeped through his tan shirt.

Court's eyes were glazed with fury, not only because a crazed, bloodthirsty henchman strutted like a cocky rooster, preparing to whip him like a common criminal, but because Laureli had ordered it. His fury was mixed with hurt and pain that she could feel this way. He knew now that there was much more to her relationship with Wynn Garrett than she had let on. Last night when she had been warm and willing and seductive, she had merely been setting him up for this ambush. She, herself, had probably taken his pistol from its holster, leaving him defenseless against these men.

But Court didn’t want to believe what his logic was telling him. His heart had witnessed the eloquence of her desire, her seductive willingness. He could still taste the sweetness of her mouth against his own, feel the hardening of her breasts against his palms. He would rather suffer the whipping than believe that she had anything to do with it. But the evidence was all too clear. Laureli Cade had sent the men out, and their intentions were not just to escort him away from Wild wood.

Luke had now dismounted. Although he held the gun to Court, his eyes cut to Johnny. He approached and spoke in a low whisper, “This ain’t what Miss Laureli wants, Johnny. She’s goin’ to be mad as hell. We’re supposed to see that he returns to San Antonio. That’s what we’re being paid for.”

Johnny smiled a macabre, threatening smile. Luke backed up. “You better keep your mouth shut, Luke. Besides, what harm is it going to do? So the Englishman will sting a little. We’ll just have a little fun with him first.” Guiltily lowering his eyes, Luke returned to his horse and dragged the reins across his left shoulder. He didn’t like this. He had been instructed to escort the man to San Antonio, and that was what he thought they were going to do. He’d seen what Johnny could do with a whip, and he knew that if he wanted, he could kill with it. Johnny had that look in his eyes now, as lethal as snake’s venom.

Johnny moved with cocky sureness in a circle around Court. Court turned in place with him, watching every move he made, watching his hands expertly recoil the whip and tap it lightly against his leg. “You goin’ to leave now. Englishman?”

“I told you,” Court responded, clenching his hands into tight fists, “that I have unfinished business here. I am not going to leave until it is finished.”

The wound stung like fire. Court did not even feel the bitter December chill. He felt only his throbbing shoulder beneath the whip-slashed material of his shirt.

“So, you ain’t goin’ to leave,” Johnny chuckled, approaching his horse and removing two long rawhide strips. The large caliber gun was pointed at Court as Johnny threw the strips to Luke. “Tie the bastard to that hitch-rail, Luke.”

Only now did the younger man regain his senses. “No, I ain’t goin’ to take part in this,” he said, refusing to pick up the strips that had fallen at his boot. “We ain’t supposed to do this.”

Court found the courage to ask, “Did Miss Cade order me to be whipped and driven off her land?”

Luke started to answer no, but Johnny quickly interjected. “She wants you whipped all right. It’s that soft-hearted foreman of hers—Joe—didn’t want you hurt.” Johnny’s gun moved menacingly to the younger man. “Now, you tie him, Luke, or you won’t be likin’ what I’ll do to you.”

Johnny was five years older and twice as big as the younger man. Luke didn't relish the idea of one of Johnny's vendettas. Thus, he reholstered his pistol and, with shaking hands, picked up the rawhide strips.

With Johnny's pistol aimed at his forehead. Court did not resist the younger man's approach. He willingly outstretched his hands when the man's eyes looked apologetically into his. Luke started to tie one of Court's hands to the sturdy hitching rail, but Johnny's voice halted him. "Tear down his shirt first."

Court wouldn't give him the satisfaction. He knew it would be suicide to try to fight off two armed men. Thus, he removed his shirt before the younger man could touch him and threw it away from him. So, Laureli wanted him whipped. She hated him that much. Court felt a wrenching pain surface from deep within him, making the stinging shoulder almost nonexistent. The rawhide strips were tied so tightly that he could not possibly have broken loose without ripping his flesh.

Johnny positioned himself behind Court, who had closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the cold winter air. He almost hoped this was someone's idea of a vicious joke, but in his heart, he knew it was not. The insidious worm standing behind him intended to whip him, and he was powerless to stop him. Only providence could intervene now, and at the moment. Court didn't feel that his luck was running very good today.

Rage rose in Court, the muscles of his back and chest so taut they were like iron. He clenched his jaws tightly, more in anger than in fright, more in hatred for Laureli Cade than in dread of the fire that would very soon crawl through his body. And in that moment. Court was determined that he would not cry out. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

Unexpectedly, the whip cut across Court's lower back. Caught off guard, he groaned, then closed his eyes tightly and stood proud and straight, his feet apart and his legs straight, refusing to buckle. His dark hair tousled by the wind was the only movement of his body.

"Took what we have here." Johnny sneered. ''A brave English boy, goin' to take his punishment like a man."

When Johnny drew his hand back to lash again, Luke sprang forward, attempting to stop the downward thrust of Johnny's arm. But he was violently pushed away, lost his footing on the wet mud, and the whip lashed the ground very near Luke's head. Instinctively, Court, too, flinched.

Johnny was furious. It had been more than a month since he'd had the pleasure of whipping a man—a young Mexican who had asked Luke's sister, a white girl, to dance at one of the Traylors' barn dances—and he was well overdue for this moment of fun. He pointed a menacing finger at Luke. "You try that again, Luke,

and you'll take his place."

The whip lashed again, and again, and again, leaving thin, bloody welts across Court's back and shoulders. The fact that he refused to cry out infuriated Johnny. The singing of the whip suddenly halted and Johnny approached Court, wrapped his fingers through his thick, dark hair and wrenched his head painfully back. "You tryin' to humiliate me in front of Luke there, huh. Englishman? I swear, you don't cry out, or drop to them straight, proper knees, and I won't leave enough clean flesh on your back to stick a pin in. I swear—"

A rifle shot suddenly rang out, the bullet ripping through Johnny's hat and sending him flying to the ground in fear for his life. A dozen yards away, Laureli Cade sat astride her horse, her rifle lowering to the man she knew as Derrick's half-brother—a man she loathed enough to kill, given enough provocation.

''What the hell. Miss Laureli—" Johnny screamed, propping himself on his elbows.

"You sling your gun away, Johnny Raines, and that whip, or I'll put a bullet square between your eyes."

He knew she could do it. She had been taught by the best marksman in Texas—her own father, Matthew Cade. Outraged that a mere woman had crept up on him, he obeyed her orders, then came to his feet. "We was just having a little fun with him."

Court, barely conscious, was not sure how he had regained his footing through the merciless beating. Only now did he slowly drop to his knees, and his forehead fell to the cool, smooth wood of the hitching rail. He felt as though his entire body had been drenched in coal oil and set afire. His wrists stung beneath the tight rawhide strips.

Laureli could scarcely hold back the tears as she saw what had been done. But she could not allow Johnny Raines to witness her vulnerability. Her rifle followed his movements as he rose, then mounted his horse. Luke Traylor quickly mounted his own horse. "Miss Laureli, I didn't have nothing to do with it," he said. "I swear... don't tell my pa."

"Just get off Wildwood land, the two of you," she ordered, choking back the tears that moistened her eyes. "And Johnny Raines—you leave that whip right there. I'll deal with you later."

"Miss Laureli, that was my daddy's whip!" he pleaded with childish indignation.

"I don't care if it was Saint Assisi's whip," she responded quietly. "You take it with you and you'll have that extra hole in your head that I promised you."

As Johnny and Luke spurred their horses into fast gallops, a painful lump rose in Laureli's throat as she cut her gaze between the retreating men and Court's

bound, half-naked body. Slowly, she alit her horse, slipped the rifle back into its sheath and approached Court.

He was scarcely aware of her movements as she untied the rawhide strips and his palms, first the right, then the left. She dropped heavily to the ground to support his pain-wracked body. She gently put his shirt across his back and he cringed. When she tried to help him rise, life suddenly sprang back into him. His body, slumping just moments ago, became rigid. His eyes became as black as indigo.

‘‘What are you going to do... finish the job yourself?”

‘‘No... Court... I want to...”

“Get away from me! Bitch!”

She deserved the sting of his words. Tears flowed freely down Laureli’s cheeks, turning to ice in the bitter wind. The blood of his wounds seeped quickly through the tan shirt. “Please, let me help you,” she pleaded, again trying to position her body beneath his arm for support. But again he slung her away. Slowly, his ragged face turned to her. He said nothing; his eyes said it all.

But all the things he wanted to say to her gathered in his half-awake state. He saw her as a lethal beauty—a cobra waiting to strike. He saw her brutality even through the veneer of her loveliness. Strangely, even in his pain, his body responded to her seductive nearness, to her gently coaxing hands as she tried to help him, but he would not allow it.

The last things he remembered were darkness, like a dark, misty cloud, suddenly enveloping him from head to toe, and the sweet lavender of her perfume as he collapsed against the clean softness of her fur-lined coat and the twin mounds of supple flesh just beneath.

His body was in hell, but his heart had just enjoyed the celestial provocativeness of a wild Texas beauty. He wasn’t sure which was more deadly: Laureli Cade, or the braided coils of the whip that had taken away his consciousness.

Chapter Nine

Laureli sobbed bitterly, feeling the heaviness of his head against her breast, sinking, sinking, until his cheek touched the soft fabric of her riding habit. She cared not that the ground was muddy, nor that her tears turned to ice on her cheeks. She cared only that the man who had stirred such wonderful fantasies in her—the man whose humane acts and gentleness had won her heart—lay wounded and unconscious in her lap. The thought that she was responsible for his condition was as painful as tentacles reaching into her heart to squeeze the life out of it.

He was too heavy to move, so she sat there, rocking back and forth, cradling his

head in her lap. Belleza stood silently by, more obedient than she had been last evening when she had panicked and abandoned her mistress on the trail. The mare seemed to sense Laureli's sorrow; her head, normally held proud and straight, now lowered to nuzzle Laureli's cheek.

Had his unconsciousness lasted hours, or just the few minutes that it took him to stir, to realize where he was and push himself clumsily to his knees? Laureli was too distraught to be aware of the time that had passed, and only the sun, which had not yet left the horizon, told her a mere few minutes had passed. She met the gray-black hatred in his eyes as they lifted to her pale, weeping ones.

But he would not be taken in by false emotions. When her hand eased toward his shoulder to offer him comfort, he slapped it away. Laureli was sure that the pain in her own face was much greater than that in his.

"You've seen what you wanted to see," he accused hoarsely. "Why don't you go now, so that you can boast about it to your friends!" Slowly, pain etching lines into his forehead, he tried to pull on his tan shirt, but could not. When Laureli moved to assist him, he jolted back from her. "I don't need your help." The strength to rise came from so deep inside that Court was surprised; perhaps, his hatred of Laureli Cade had bred that strength, and the sight of her sitting there, trying to appear humble and hurt, only nurtured that strength.

Laureli did not attempt to stand, but lifted her eyes to meet his glaring ones. "Please, believe me, Court, I am not responsible for this. I wanted only for you to be escorted away from Wildwood."

"By force and brutality?" he queried, bracing himself against the hitch-rail. He hid the pain in his eyes by turning away from her. "Is that your way. Miss Laureli Cade?"

Laureli rose clumsily to her feet. "Yes, by force, if necessary," she replied, her hand easing out, but pulling back when he cringed from her touch. She was not sure if his reaction had been caused by the pain of the wounds, or his revulsion of her. Both were tearing her emotions asunder. "But never this. Court. You have stirred something magical in me. I was coming here to—"

Suddenly, Court whirled toward her and his brittle laughter rent the air. Laureli was taken aback by the daggers of contempt in his hooded gaze. "You were coming here to what? Watch them beat me?"

The hastily spoken accusation cut her to the core. "I was hoping to intercept Joe," she replied humbly, sniffing back her tears. "I was coming to abort the orders I had given him. I don't want you to leave, Court. I wanted to protect Wynn from you... that is the only reason I wanted you away from Wildwood. But knowing you, being with you—that is more important than the fear I feel for Wynn Garrett's fate."

Court's strength began to wane, enough so that he could no longer argue with her. He stood, his fingers clutched so firmly around the hitching rail that the muscles of his arms grew taut. He suddenly realized how cold it was, that his shirt had slipped, baring his wounds. For some strange, unexplainable reason, when she approached him, pried his hands loose from the rail and drew his shirt sleeves up his arms, he did not protest. Perhaps he was too weak. Perhaps the events of the last few minutes had defeated him. Perhaps he was insane. His body physically responded to her erotic nearness, to her shoulder that once again scooted beneath his arm as she led him around the hitching rail and into the small cabin. She saw that he had added new logs to the fire within the last hour, and the cabin was glowing with warmth.

Once inside, his anger and rebellion returned and he pulled from her. He gently eased onto the small cot to lie on his stomach, then drew his right hand up to rest his head upon it. He heard Laureli's stirrings, a new log added to the fire, the thin curtains at the window being pulled together. He could almost hear the violent tremble of her body as she moved from here to there, doing things that really did not need to be done. The fragrance of her wafted through the small cabin, intoxicating him, enveloping his hatred within her invisible aura.

Although his wounds stung like hell, her pain hurt him more than his own. His eyes were opened just enough to watch her movements, see the shame and hurt in her face, but when she looked in his direction, he hid his scrutiny beneath his thick, dark lashes. He watched her take a porcelain ewer from a small table and go out of doors with it, to fill it at the well fifty feet across a small clearing. When she returned, she set it on the floor and moved his hand from beneath his face so that she could remove his shirt. He did not protest.

Court did not move so much as a muscle as she tenderly bathed the wounds, then applied a thick, stinging ointment. He did not react to the renewed pain because almost instantly he felt the numbness produced by the carefully applied ointment. She seemed genuinely concerned for him, her lovely face reddened by the tears she had shed, her almond-shaped eyes glazed with moisture. He felt her fingers trembling as they applied the salve, felt the whisper of her shallow breathing against his flesh. He startled her by suddenly turning to his side and gripping her shoulders firmly between his hands. "You really weren't aware that this would happen, were you?"

"No," she responded, unable to prevent the tremor that settled in her voice.

He was afraid to believe her, yet it was the one thing in the world he wanted to believe. "And if the man had not heeded your warning shot, what would you have done?"

"I would have killed him," she replied without hesitation.

Her face pinched with determination, with something so tangible that Court knew she was speaking from her heart. He believed she would have killed him. The question was why? Would it have been because she hated the man who wielded the whip, or because she cared so dearly for the man who had borne the brunt of that brutality? He wanted to believe the latter; certainly, it was the message his heart gave to him. Thus, he scooted to the far edge of the bunk and patted the space he had just vacated.

"Lie beside me, Laureli."

"Are you cold?" she asked coyly.

"No."

"Then why would you want me to lie beside you?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"One might help."

"All right." Court allowed himself the tiniest smile. "I am cold and..." The smile widened, though only briefly—as briefly as the mischief that twinkled in his thunder-colored eyes. "I don't think a blanket will suffice by itself."

With only the slightest hesitation, Laureli eased to the bunk beside him. She rested her head on the pillow beside his own and their gazes met and held. She wished they could continue with the events of last night and pretend that nothing had happened to place a barrier between them. She wished that Poppy and Jessie did not constantly dog her trail, watching her, waiting for danger to befall her so that they could intervene in her behalf. She wished, for once, that she could be alone with the man of her choice. Perhaps this morning, she would have that chance. Poppy and Jessie had both ridden into Brazoria and would not return until tomorrow. Joe and the men were out on the ranges, bringing in the strays that had not been found during the night. She knew that Luke Traylor would be too frightened to tell his father what Johnny Raines had done, and would be gone the appropriate length of time to convince him that he had been to San Antonio.

That left only the women, Pietra, at Wildwood, Tia at Little Wildwood, and Consuelo still with Solon Delano in the Raines cabin on the north side of Wildwood. But she didn't want to think about that. She didn't want to remember her short conversation with Solon Delano, her explanations as to why Wynn Garrett had to be placed in hiding. She didn't want to think about anything but Court, who sought her comfort when he had every right to hate her. All she wanted was to feel his powerful, yet gentle hand on her back with infinite care to draw her close. She wanted only to feel the whisper-softness of his breath against her cheek and his clean dark hair graze against her forehead in a tender, intimate move.

"Laureli,'' he whispered huskily. "You must understand how I feel."

She had misunderstood his meaning. ‘‘And you must understand how I feel about Wynn. He saved my life...”

‘‘Not him. Not now, Laureli. You must know how I feel about you. How I’ve felt since the very first time I felt your mouth protesting the kiss I stole on a cold November morning. You must know that for this past year my heart has been heavy with a longing for you. Only a willpower without a visible source has kept me from you. I have been everywhere throughout Texas... except here... because I was afraid of you, of the power you held over me.”

Laureli cooed timidly against his hairline. “Court, what are you saying? That you want me... Laureli Cade? Or do you merely wish to add my name to your long list of feminine conquests?”

“I have been too busy for such conquests,” he whispered in reply. “The man you know as Wynn Garrett has owned my every sleeping and waking moment. But, he is now within my reach—” Court was surprised by the sudden rigidity of Laureli’s slim frame against his own, although he let the moment of confusion quickly pass. “It is time to nurture something much stronger, and much more permanent, than vengeance. It is time to nurture what God expects of man and woman. I want you, Laureli. Even now, though I should be self-absorbed in my own pain, I want only you.” His gaze met her wavering, almost alarming one. She wondered if he were delirious, if he was even aware of what he was saying. He had just been dealt a terrible whipping, yet he acted as though nothing had happened. He did not even respond to her fingers at his shoulder, nor to the accidental grazing of one of the wounds. She cared only that his mouth sought hers, imprisoning it beneath his for a long, searing, never-ending caress, and she responded hungrily to it. She cared only that his hand rose to the back of her head, as though he would prevent her from trying to pull away from him. But she had no intention of doing so. She wanted to be with him, to feel his strong, protective arms around her, to feel the arousing nakedness of his chest against her thin blouse. She did not remember removing her fur-lined jacket; she knew only that it was not an annoying barrier between them.

‘‘Did I tell you,” he whispered against her hairline, “the message that was left for you last night?”

‘‘A message... for me?” she responded in between his teasing kisses. “In such a storm?”

“A young, slim boy on a white stallion...”He became aware of the sudden halting of her breath. She had been chasing the stallion for five years, and Court mentioned it so casually. But he was the first of many who had seen the horse to say that it had carried a rider.

“You are delirious,” she replied, meeting his unblinking gaze. “There is no such

white stallion that can be ridden by a mere boy."

"Oh, but there is, Laureli. And his message was that you should forget the stallion... that it belongs to the boy. His name was Sam—"

Was he delirious, indeed! For twenty years she had been hearing tales of a boy named Sam who had once lived at Wildwood and who had disappeared without a trace, never to be heard from again. He would have been about the age of the boy Court claimed had been riding the white horse. The legend on the Brazos was that the horse was an illusion—a ghost the brave ventured to admit. But the skeptics had laughed, although Laureli hadn't. No man—or woman—had ever gotten close to the horse—that is, until last evening. Was the horse, and the boy, indeed, the ghosts of the Brazos, who had entertained many a child on dark, stormy nights? Laureli shuddered at the thought. The stallion had become an obsession to her. It had dodged the bullets of men's rifles and had made the forests of the Brazos its home. She had, herself, wanted to capture and tame the stallion—not some unknown boy who had said his name was Sam.

But Laureli knew that the only male thing she wanted to tame was in her arms this very minute. Thus, in an almost haunting whisper, she replied, "Should you see him again, Court, tell him... tell him that I shall honor his request." She shivered, drawing Court more closely into her embrace. She wanted to soothe away his pain, mend the ache in his heart, erase all the doubts he had about her character. He was warm and tender, desiring her now as he had desired her last night. But just thirty minutes ago, in his rage at being beaten, he had called her a bitch. And in that moment, tears filled her eyes and could not be contained. Confused, Court kissed her nose, where a tear hung precariously on its tip, then touched his mouth to each of her violet eyelids in turn.

"My darling, why this emotion?"

His mouth assailed her willing one, teasing it, trailing caresses across her flaming cheeks, across her disheveled hairline, lowering, to the polished cotton blouse held together by mere buttons. With his teeth, he popped each, in turn, and, holding her wrists gently between his hands, he eased away the fabric of her blouse and bared her right breast. His tongue teased, traced a circle around the supple flesh, feeling it become a hard button against his ample mouth.

"Court... Court..." she whispered, intoxicated by the excitement of his touch that surfaced from within her. ''Your wounds—"

"What wounds?" he murmured, his body making a sudden move and topping her slender frame. She felt his legs entwine among her own. "There is nothing to stop us now," he continued, fondling her other breast, "except these damned, restricting binds of our clothing.''

Laureli was suddenly attacked by conscience. She wanted nothing more than to

be with Court, to experience that which men and women were put on earth to experience, but there was still the matter of Wynn Garrett. She had robbed Court of his prey by hiding him away. He was so willing to believe that she would not order him whipped—indeed, she would never do anything so brutal—and yet, she still deceived him. Could she be with him, like this, knowing that she had taken away that which he wanted more than life itself these past seven years? She had asked herself the same question a hundred times last evening. It seemed that she would get tired of it. But now, she was asking the same question again. Could she engage in trickery against him, and love him, at the same moment?

Court moved with the agility of a stalking panther, his hands like gently treading paws, his body heavy, yet light, above her. His hands cupped her face as his eyes took in every God-given attribute of her features: the slim nose, the high, rose-colored cheekbones, the sootiness of her black lashes beneath copper eyebrows, the slight pout of her full, sensual mouth, the tiny curls disheveled upon her forehead, and the mass of auburn tresses that formed a wide veil on the pillow. His eyes lowered to supple, milk-white breasts, and the dark circles, like bronze rosebuds, beckoning his caresses, and he could not deny himself the taste of such sweetness. His hands moved fluidly, masterfully down from her firm jawline, and pressed her breasts together, so that he might bury his face in their soft fullness.

"You are so lovely, Laureli... you make me forget everything, but that I am a man."

''And if you will move from me," she wooed teasingly, "I will show you how much a woman I am."

He had already seen that last night, in the midnight darkness, spying on her through the thin curtain, and against the bronze fire of the hearth as she had scooted from her blanket into the intimacy of his own. But his eyes had not gotten enough of her last evening, and his body still longed for her, unnurtured and unquenched for the treasure that he had tasted only briefly last evening.

Court's look was spellbound by her elegance as her long, lithe form was slowly uncovered, as each garment touched the floor: her blouse, her riding skirt, the short, feminine boots, her chemise and delicate undergarments. She stood nude before him as though she had done it a thousand times before, for the eyes of a thousand admiring men. But his masculine pride would not allow him to believe that any other man had seen her like this: so willing, so seductive, and so innocent. She was his for the taking—a virginal treasure that willed him into her arms.

Slowly, Court rose. When he started to remove his belt and unbutton his trousers, Laureli took his hands and briefly brought them to her supple mouth, to

kiss each knuckle, slowly, confidently, so wantonly uninhibited that he was intoxicated by the seductiveness of her.

To say that her body was perfect was an understatement. She was exquisite, her breasts firm and full, her tiny waist becoming a gentle butterfly of rounded hips, her long legs beautifully shaped, as if they had been molded by the hands of ancient masters.

She was like a dream in transition, the physical left behind for the celestial. He no longer felt the pain of the wounds, but the pain of his loins as his body hungered almost greedily for her. That they were in a line shack on a hill just up from the Brazos did not fetter his desire for the woman who deserved a more luxurious setting for her first sexual tryst, nor the thought of being intercepted, as they had been last evening. He wanted only to share this moment with her, and to be the most important person in her life.

And he was exactly that. Laureli watched his trousers eased down his slim hips and firm, muscular legs. He stepped casually out of them, revealing, uninhibitingly, the taut, masculine, well-endowed groin that she had gotten only a mere glimpse of last evening. The early morning remained veiled in the gray-black overcast of last evening's violent storm, and the cabin was in near darkness, the only light the warm, emberlike glow of the hearth. They were, together, like bronze statues suddenly animated by desire and love, caught in a fantasy world of glass and mirrors and crystal chandeliers. She could almost hear the tinkle of crystal droplets, feel the icy warmth of their fiery candles and the magnetism of his bronze flesh closing the mere breath of space that separated their bodies.

He held her closely for the longest time, content just to feel the nakedness of her warm body against his own, her soft, supple form molding to his hard one. Her hands, resting on his forearms just moments before, now caressed an arousing trail upward on his muscular arms and found a very brief resting place on his broad shoulders. It was as if the marks of the whip he had suffered had become nonexistent; it was too special a moment for Court to feel the aftereffects of one man's brutality, when he was enjoying the feminine treasures of the siren who had stepped so willingly into his embrace.

Although Laureli had never been with a man, like this, she enjoyed the hardness of his groin against her tender thighs, the whisper softness of his breath against her hairline as his hands gently massaged her back and neck. Then, almost impatiently, his fingers wound their way through the long, disheveled tresses of her auburn hair and coaxed her mouth to his own, imprisoning it beneath a wondrously erotic, almost bruising kiss. She reveled in it, enjoyed the sweetness of his breath inside her mouth, his tongue that sought her own like a

wild, impetuous plaything that eluded his search.

Her body was feather-light as Court coaxed her to the wide bunk and eased atop her, all the while caressing her with every movement of his body. His well-muscled legs entwined with hers, his hands content to caress the beauty of her features, his chest a heaving, pulsating thing so lightly pressed to her breasts that it was as though they did not touch at all. And in that moment, the glass house and its mirrors and magnificent chandeliers began to revolve, like a magical carousel, all around them—a mirage imprisoning willing lovers on a high, distant cloud that could not be touched by mortal man.

The exhilaration of intimacy erased any apprehension Laureli might have felt. Her skin tingled beneath Court's masterful touch as his hands lowered, coaxing her warm flesh into fiery greed, his long, masculine body possessing her, awakening a longing within her that had once been sterile and empty. She had almost felt that glorious revelation last night, and she was determined that nothing mortal would part them within their glass house of amorous whim.

Court ached for her. She was so like a wild, untamed she-cat beneath him that he, for a moment, harbored the thought that perhaps he was not the first man to be with her. But the ugly thought lasted only for that very brief moment and his mouth again covered hers, coaxing a kittenish moan from her, trailing sweet kisses across her pert chin, down the long, slim column of her neck to the tantalizing buds of her breasts. His left hand lowered, finding the treasure it sought, warm and moist and ready, even now, to satisfy the greed and hunger that suddenly made their fantasy a mad, materialistic thing.

Laureli's powder-blue eyes were glazed with longing, with anticipation as they met Court's dark gaze against the glow of the hearth. She felt his hard maleness against her thigh, felt his hand lower, to coax her slim legs apart. When his gaze wavered for a moment, almost guiltily, she knew that he could no longer put off the agonizingly primal demand that had brought them together. And that very intimate part of him scarcely penetrated her, moving, oh, so slowly, into the hot vortex of her abdomen. When he hesitated, and she immediately knew why, she heaved her hips mightily against his manhood, then drowned her cry of pain against his mouth.

"Laureli," he muttered. "Forgive me."

Tears filled her eyes, though not from pain, but from the fantasy world that had brought them together—one she was not willing to relinquish just yet. "You did nothing," she whispered. "You have merely made me a woman, wholly and completely."

Deftly, his hips began to move; such sweet, sweet agony intoxicating each other with seductive, arousing movements. Soon, she began to move also, to meet his

tempo, to match his pace with the willingness of her passion. This was a moment she had longed for, had dreamed of, since first seeing the tall, slim Court McKennon, even when she had believed him to be another man's wife. Moisture sheened his heaving chest as her palms moved carefully around the wounds so as not to destroy one single moment of this beautiful act of passion she had longed for these past thirteen months.

Then with their mouths locked, their breath moved in ragged rhythm together, and their hips fused as they reached the height of passion together in wondrous rapture. They both knew that the short expanse of time during which they had shared their celestial fantasy had bound them for an eternity.

Laureli knew that, tomorrow, he might hate her, but he would always want her.

Court knew it, too. Whatever reviling thing she did to him, tomorrow or a thousand tomorrows hence, he would always want her. She was the intoxicant in his soul, like a soft, supple sorceress who owned him. Strangely, that was the way he wanted it.

They remained together throughout the long, overcast day, loving each other and sleeping in each other's arms when exhaustion overwhelmed them. Court took to his heart and his memories the tender caresses of her fingertips as they tended his wounds, lest they should be parted for even a moment and he would have to rely on his memories to bring them back together. In twenty-four hours Laureli Cade had become the very life that flowed through Court's veins, and he knew he could never leave her. Even in his moments of half-sleep, he tried to figure ways to get his prisoner back to England for the long overdue trial and hanging, without having to leave the lovely Texas woman who had stolen his heart. But the capture of Colleen's killer was something he had worked too hard for to be deprived of the ultimate pleasure in seeing Gye Bedford hang from the gallows at Newgate Prison.

Later, Court slept heavily, drugged by the very small amount of laudanum Laureli had put in his coffee so that he could enjoy a peaceful rest. He had not known she would leave him this night, and she had not told him. But, logically, she would have to return home, or she would draw a search party, and certainly the suspicion of Poppy and Jessie when Pietra announced to the entire community that she had been missing for an entire day.

The heaviness of night veiled Laureli's return to Wildwood. She had, again, taken Court's horse, so that he was effectively a prisoner of the small cabin on the Brazos.

Today she had enjoyed his love and his passion. She wanted him always to love her, never to hate her; to want her, never to repel her.

She would return to him in the early dawn of the next day, and together they

would return to Wildwood.

Then she would know if their day of intoxicating love had won her a permanent place in his heart.

Chapter Ten

The fury that had manifested itself earlier that morning when Laureli had seen Court whipped had returned full force by the time she reached Wildwood. She stabled Court's horse, then, when she would have returned to the house to report to Pietra, she went instead to the bunkhouse and summoned Joe.

"Get a couple of men, Joe, and come with me."

"Where to, Miss Laureli?"

She turned away, but said over her very taut shoulder, "Over to the Raines place."

"Johnny Raines's place? Whatever for, Miss Laureli?"

When she did not respond, Joe, rubbing his thinning hair, turned in the doorway and summoned two of the younger men from the table where a game of cards was just being dealt. "You... Pal and Ward... come with me.

Within fifteen minutes, the four riders moved quickly along the Brazos toward the north and the small, ramshackle homestead where Johnny Raines lived alone. The heavy coats and ponchos of the four were not very successful in warding off the cold December night, but that didn't matter to Laureli, who shivered violently beneath her own fur-lined jacket. Right now, all she wanted was revenge.

Johnny, half drunk and half naked, heard the approach of the fast-moving horses. Swinging the liquor jug across his shoulder he eased the rickety cabin door open and stepped out to the porch. Immediately, he was met by two handguns and two rifles.

Joe and the other men followed Laureli's leadership. When she raised her rifle and aimed, the three men aimed, also.

"Johnny Raines, you whipped a man on my property today."

The half-naked Johnny, too filled with the fiery whiskey he had been drinking to shiver in the cold, eased his hands out from his hips in an effort to show her that he was not armed. But he had merely been attempting to divert her attention and when he turned to flee into his cabin, a rifle shot rang out, shattering the stone jug of home-brewed whiskey Johnny held in his left hand. "Miss Laureli," he whined intoxicatingly, "what the hell's the problem? You wanted him off your property. Dammit, he's just a foreigner—"

Laureli aimed the rifle straight at Johnny's heart. "I don't care if he was a snake in the grass. He was on my property and you had no right to whip him. Now... you get off that porch."

Johnny turned again, but Joe raised his rifle menacingly. “Miss Laureli said for you to get off that porch, Johnny.”

“I was just goin’ to get my coat. It’s damn cold out here, Joe.”

“Just get off the porch,” Joe repeated with more determination.

Johnny suddenly found himself surrounded by the four riders. He still held his hands away from his body rather ridiculously, since the riders were well aware that he could not hide a weapon in the tight trousers he wore. Slowly, Laureli slipped her rifle back into the sheath and removed Johnny’s whip from the back of her saddle. “This is the whip you used on him, isn’t it, Johnny?” she asked rather caustically.

“You know it is,” he shot back, angry as hell but afraid to let her or the men sense it. “What you going to—”

Without warning, the whip popped out, catching Johnny at mid-chest just enough to redden the flesh and raise a blister before the night was over. She was as good with a whip as she was with a rifle, and the men who stood guard for her watched with growing admiration as she reduced the bully of the Brazos to a simpering fool crawling on his knees. She popped the whip again and again, touching only the tip of it to Johnny’s flesh. Soon, she had Johnny where she wanted him, crawling on the ground, sobbing drunkenly and rubbing the blisters that were beginning to surface. Only then did she throw the offensive, destructive instrument, hitting Johnny across the left shoulder and causing him to lose his balance.

“You ever whip a man on my property again, Johnny Raines, and you’ll wake up with more than blisters. Do you hear?”

Without awaiting his answer, Laureli turned and fled back to the trail leading toward Wildwood. She stayed ahead of the men so they could not see the tears that wet her eyes.

Laureli entered the foyer of Wildwood with all the exhaustion of the world in her pale features. Pietra prepared a meal for her, but Laureli was too tired to eat. Thus, she returned to her bedchamber, relaxed in a warm bath Pietra had prepared for her, then snatched a couple hours of sleep before again rising. In the darkness of the midnight hour, she dressed, crept from the house and resaddled Belleza. She led the mare onto the trail before mounting, then sped off into the distance toward the Raines cabin. She found Consuelo napping and Solon Delano debriding the more serious wounds across Wynn’s left shoulder. When Laureli quietly entered, Solon gave her a brief, but very reprimanding look.

‘‘Is he going to be all right?” Laureli asked stiffly, settling into a chair beside the bunk. She saw then that Wynn was conscious, and that he managed a very small smile when his eyes met hers.

“I’ll be all right,” Wynn replied. “The kind doctor says that the burns appear more serious than they really are. I want to thank you for helping me... for bringing me here where I will be safe.”

Laureli’s mouth pressed into a thin line. She wondered if either Consuelo or Solon had told him of the accusations against him. “I want to know now, Wynn, if you are the man Court McKennon is searching for.” It wrenched her heart to see him burned and in pain, and yet able to smile when he saw her. “I don’t want you to lie to me. I want the truth, and I want it now.”

Wynn tried to move, but Solon’s gentle hand held him down. “I swear. Miss Laureli, I don’t know what Mr. McKennon is talking about. True, I am English... I cannot possibly deny that, but I have never hurt anyone, especially a young woman.”

Laureli wanted to believe him. Court had, after all, said that he had evidence that would prove to her that Wynn was, in fact, Gye Bedford, the man he had been tracking for seven years. For now, her instinct was to believe Wynn, until Court could convince her otherwise. “Very well, Wynn. You just rest and I’ll look in on you occasionally.”

“And Mr. McKennon?”

“Don’t worry... I will keep Mr. McKennon busy, and he will not find out where you are.”

Solon readjusted the sheet, then turned and faced Laureli. “I don’t think it’s necessary that I stay any longer. The wounds will heal quickly. I’ll return in a week to clean and debride the more serious wounds on his shoulders and face. For now, I believe that Consuelo will be able to care for his wounds, and she has graciously consented to remain with him round the clock and attend his needs.” Everything Consuelo had learned of nursing care had been learned from Solon Delano. It was logical that he should place so much faith in her abilities.

“Very well,” Laureli replied. “I’ll send a bank draft in payment of your services.”

Only now did Solon’s voice soften. “I’ve never worried about such things,” he said. “You just take care of yourself, too, Laureli. I, and half the population of Texas, have promised your father and mother that you will be cared for.”

She smiled sadly, then gave him a long, affectionate hug. “What would we have done without you all these years, Dr. Delano?”

“Nonsense,” he replied, gruffly pulling away. “I am part of the family. After all, did I not bring your brother into the world? How is the naughty lad, by the way?”

“Busy at his studies at West Point.” Laureli spoke fondly of her younger brother, Timothy. “I’m afraid he’s gotten a couple of demerits for mischief, but

that is normal for Timothy. I'm sure that, like father, he will graduate with honors. You'll be able to see him in June. He'll be coming home for a few weeks. I'm sure we'll throw a ball and invite all the eligible young ladies from throughout Texas," she said on a pleasant note.

"And this old bugger will be there, too," he replied, "to make sure the bad boy picks a lass suitable to his station."

In departing Laureli assured him that a horse would be sent back for him and that his buggy would be ready for his departure. She promised an escort for the aging Dr. Delano, because she could not bear the thought of anything happening to him. He was so dear to her and to her family. She could never forgive herself if he was waylaid by one of the rabble who had been moving through Texas.

Laureli returned to the Wildwood stables, unsaddled and groomed her horse in the light of the one solitary lantern, then stabled the mare. After informing Joe that a horse had to be taken to the Raines cabin and Solon's buggy prepared for his departure, she moved wearily toward the house. There, she found herself confronted by Pietra, her arms crossed at her heavy bosom, and her toe stamping in that outrageous fashion so common to her family. Laureli recalled her mother remarking that Tia shared that annoying habit, but Tia was not the one being confronted in the foyer.

''Where have you been, Miss Laureli?"

''I was checking on Wynn Garrett," she replied truthfully.

Immediately, Pietra's arms uncrossed, and her voice softened to suit the occasion. "And how is the unfortunate hombre?"

"We believe he's going to live," she replied, managing a very small smile. "But we never know about these things. If he does live. Dr. Delano says that there should be very little scarring after the healing process is completed."

"He is very lucky, eh?" Pietra remarked, accompanying Laureli into the parlor. "Shall I prepare a mug of hot cocoa to help you sleep? You will catch your death going out in this weather. The men believe another storm is heading in from the north."

Red sky at night, sailors' delight, red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. The old superstition sat in Laureli's mind for a moment. Perhaps the men were right. Dawn had been as crimson as any she had ever seen.

She drank the cocoa, only because Pietra had insisted.

"I need to go out again, Pietra," she said, moving toward the foyer.

Pietra, however, barred her exit. "You will go nowhere tonight. Miss Laureli. You have already been away the whole day and most of the night. I don't know what you have been doing, but I am sure I would not approve. So—'' She puffed up like her staunch rooster, and her small black eyes dared Laureli to defy her.

“Take to your bedchamber, miss, for the sleep you need.”

Without argument, Laureli slowly climbed the stairs toward her bedchamber, a little miffed that Pietra stood in the foyer, absently flicking a dust rag at furniture—past midnight, mind you—determined that Laureli would not leave the house again on so cold a night. When she reached the top of the stairs she said, ‘‘Good night, Pietra.”

“Pleasant dreams,” Pietra replied, suspiciously watching her young mistress until she rounded the corner toward the east corridor. Laureli was thinking about Court, wondering if he was still sleeping. She wondered if he was hungry—they’d had only some coffee and a few strips of dried beef that had been left at the cabin. She wondered if he was in pain. She wondered if he had awakened and found her gone. She could not bear that. She wanted only to get back to him, but Pietra, guarding the foyer, barred her access to all three doors of the house. She crept back down the carpeted corridor and spied around the corner. Pietra had taken up a chair—the eternal sentry—and was determined that Laureli would not leave the house again that night.

Laureli slowly undressed, donned a comfortable flannel gown and eased beneath the pile of sheets and quilts and blankets of her bed. The hearth in her bedchamber glowed almost eerily, yet it was comforting.

She had added plenty of logs to Court’s fire before she had left the cabin and hoped that he was as comfortable as she. She turned on her side and bent her arm beneath her auburn tresses, staring hypnotically into the large, elegant hearth and wishing it were the simple brick hearth at the cabin instead. She wanted to be with Court, to lie beside him and feel his strength encompassing her within the aura of his very being. What was it about the handsome Englishman that so intrigued her, that caused her to do something she had sworn not to do until she had married?

They had made sweet, wonderful love all through the morning and day. It was a day to be forever branded in her most cherished memories. Soon, she heard Solon’s buggy pull away from the Wildwood stables, and the dull plod of the horse whose rider would serve as his guard on the return journey to Brazoria. Then silence fell, magnifying the whistling of the breeze through the pine trees in which Wildwood was nestled, echoing the wintry flow of the Brazos just across the expanse of hills and flatlands that separated her from the little river.

Laureli fell asleep only because she forced all thoughts out of her mind except Court. She felt the comfort of his physical warmth in her memories, not the heavy warmth of the quilts and blankets atop her slim body. She remembered the gray-blackness of his gaze as they had made love, not the rage he had exhibited earlier against her. She wanted only for morning to come so that she could

saddle Belleza and ride out to the line cabin. In the morning, she would have to face the consequences of what she had done. She could bear almost anything—his curses, his threats, even the lethal look she had experienced just that morning. But she would never be able to accept his hatred. He could confess it, but the thought did not faze Laureli. She had enough faith in the bond they had formed this long, wondrous day after Christmas to know that he would forgive her, no matter what she did.

Despite the moment of truth that was upon her, Laureli arose early, happy and exhilarated, hurriedly dressed and rushed out to the stables to saddle her mare while little Manuel saddled Court's rented gelding. She wanted to reach the cabin before he awoke, so that he would not know he had been alone through the long night. She wanted to accompany him back to Wildwood. She wanted to know how deeply his feelings ran for her. Today, when he learned what she had done, she would know the extent of his desire for her. There was no doubt about her own. She knew she was in love with Court McKennon.

Only the slightest chill permeated the small cabin when Laureli entered. At some point during the night. Court had turned to his side and was now nestled beneath the two heavy woolen blankets. Only embers remained of last evening's blazing fire. Since she did not plan for them to remain at the cabin, she did not add new logs to the hearth.

She knelt beside Court, and her fingers gently brushed back an unruly lock of dark hair that had settled on his forehead. He moved slightly, but did not awaken. She hoped that she had not given him too much laudanum last evening and became alarmed when at first he didn't respond to her hand gently shaking his shoulder. The shake became more violent and she called his name in something of a panic. "Court—Court!"

His eyes slowly opened and he raised his hand from the warmth of the blanket to rub them. ''What are you going to do? Knock me out of the bunk?" He was not sure of the reason for her look of relief, but the innocence that touched her features warmed him as thoroughly as the blankets he was nestled in. His hand scooted to the back of her head. "Come here." Gently, he touched his mouth to her cheek. "Have you been with me all night?"

She wanted to say that she had, but she could not lie to him. Enough lies had already been told, and deceptions existed that might cool his feelings for her. "No," she shrugged. "I had things to do."

"What things?" he queried, tucking his arm beneath his head.

She could not tell him that she had given Johnny Raines a taste of his own medicine. She could not tell him that she had ridden out to the ramshackle shack where Wynn was in hiding. She could not truthfully tell him anything that she

had done after leaving, except that she had gotten a good night's sleep. "And I thought about you—

"Then why did you not return?"

She shrugged, mischief playing in the light of her eyes. "Pietra stood guard in the foyer. She would have beaten me with a broom if I had tried to leave the house again."

"Oh, I see."

"How are your wounds?" Tenderly, she drew the blanket back.

"I've suffered worse," he replied, swinging his feet to the floor so quickly that he startled her. She rose. "Hand me my shirt, will you?"

"Your shirt is cut, and bloody." She approached and opened a small canvas bag she had brought with her from the house. "I have brought you a clean shirt—one of my father's. I've also brought some shaving and necessary things. I hope I've thought of everything. I've never had to look out for the needs of a man before."

Court approached her from the back and closed her within his arms. "You have brought the most important need of a man," he responded quietly. "You have brought yourself."

She turned into his arms, lowering her eyes as she did so. "Court, there is something you should know—"

‘‘Wynn died?" he queried, cutting her short.

"No, the chances are that he will live, I understand. Court, it's just that—" Oh, how could she tell him? Couldn't she delay it just a little longer, so that he could feel only warmth and love and desire for her? She knew she would have to tell him that she had spirited Wynn away, and she knew that Court would remain at Wildwood until he found him, but she could not bear the tension that would exist between them. She knew how determined he was to take Wynn back to England with him, and he would not give up until he had him in his custody. Perhaps in that length of time she could convince him of Wynn's innocence, and of her own love and passion for him. Perhaps she could mellow the tension and the hatred he might feel for her. Perhaps, she could reason with him.

Slowly, Laureli lifted her eyes to his waiting, expectant ones. "It's nothing. I just want you to know that you're welcome to stay at Wildwood as long as you feel you need to stay."

She sounded so businesslike. His hands closed firmly over her upper arms. "Yesterday, we shared something warm and wonderful, Laureli. I am glad to be a guest at Wildwood, but it is not only because of Wynn Garrett that I accept your hospitality. Surely, you must know how I feel about you, how I have always felt about you."

Laureli gently bit her trembling lower lip. She eased from his embrace and

removed from the canvas bag the shaving things—the razor she had already sharpened and the shaving cream—and coaxed him down into a chair. She then took a few minutes to heat a pan of water in the embers of the hearth.

"Do you trust me to shave you?" she asked, taking the pan from the hearth with a folded towel.

"Shouldn't I?" He allowed the faintest hint of a smile. "Or will you cut my throat?"

"No," she responded quietly, touching her lips to his briefly and warmly, "I would do nothing to harm you... and I will stop any man who does."

Court had never allowed a woman to shave him before, especially a woman who smelled as sweet and pleasant as Laureli Cade. He made the appropriate moves and did not even flinch when the razor moved over a part of his jaw where he always managed to nick himself. She was as gentle as a lamb, and when she had finished, she knelt before him and, with a warm, wet cloth, removed the lather and short stubbles of hair that clung to his strong jawline.

"There, you are beautiful again," she said, smiling. Then she took his hand and coaxed him up. Momentarily, she held the black silk shirt she had brought with her, and her movements invited him into it. She eased the sleeves up his muscular arms, then turned him toward her, to fasten the buttons. But as her fingers lowered, they withdrew and Court, taking the cue, tucked the fancy shirt into his tan trousers. Her cheeks were a lovely crimson hue and he smiled, remembering the intimacy they had shared just yesterday.

"Do the wounds hurt?" she asked.

"I'm a fast healer. No... there is little discomfort." He attempted to pull Laureli into his arms, but she stepped out of his perimeter. "What is wrong?" he asked, his brows meeting in a confusing frown.

Laureli tried to make light of the situation. She flitted around him, linking and unlinking her fingers, then approached and tenderly took his hands and squeezed them. "Nothing... I'm just tired of this stuffy old cabin. What do you say we douse the remaining embers in the hearth and return to Wildwood. I am sure you must be starving, and I left without breakfast. We can breakfast together, and then we can sit in the morning room—"

Court instantly drew her hands to his lips. ''You are rambling, Laureli. What are you so nervous about?"

''N-nothing," she whispered hoarsely. "I'm not nervous. I just want to return to Wildwood—you and I—before Pietra begins to suspect that I'm up to something I oughtn't to be."

"Pietra!" He frowned. "I thought on Christmas Day that she would beat me off the porch with that damned broom of hers."

“Oh...”Laureli shrugged delicately. “She only looks mean. She’s really a gentle heart.”

“Well, thank God I will be staying in the bunkhouse and away from her gentle heart.”

Her breathing suddenly ceased. She did not want Court among the men, did not want him to accidentally overhear anything of her conspiracy to spirit Wynn away. One or more of the men were bound to find out the general vicinity of where Wynn was being kept, and she did not want Court to get wind of that information. “No... no, Court. I don’t want you to stay at the bunkhouse. I would rather you take a room at the main house.”

Court did not respond. They would argue about that later. He moved toward the cabin door and checked out his horse. Again, he noticed the absence of his saddlebags. When Laureli stood beside him, he asked, “Where are my saddlebags, Laureli?”

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully. “They may have been left hanging over one of the stall doors.”

“There are some very valuable papers in those bags,” he said, the softness of his voice suddenly becoming an accusation. “If they are missing, Laureli, will I know who to blame?”

“It won’t be me,” she quipped with sudden ferocity. “You said you have evidence against Wynn Garrett. If, indeed, you do, then I want to see it. I will be the last to sabotage your personal belongings, Court. I want to see this proof. Without it, I will never allow you to take Wynn Garrett away from Wildwood.”

“Nothing will stop me,” he said firmly. “As for my saddlebags, I do remember that I might have separated them from my saddle. I just don’t want them gone through by strangers—”

“None of the men at Wildwood will invade your privacy,” Laureli assured him, her hand resting, instinctively, against his chest. “I assure you of that. We will return to Wildwood, and before we do anything else—even enjoy breakfast together—I will see your evidence. Only then will I be convinced that you have found the man you know as Gye Bedford. And only then will I allow him in your custody, despite the fact that your English warrant has no authority here.”

Court gently removed her hand from his chest, but did not release it. “Then you will allow me to take the man?”

“I will not harbor a man such as you say this Gye Bedford is,” she quipped. “Even if he did save my life. If he is your man, then I will see that your warrant is honored. But I must be presented evidence beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“You will have it. Now...” Court escorted her to her mount and held the reins of the spirited mare while she mounted. “Let’s get this over with, Laureli,” he said,

mounting his own horse, “so that we can go on with other things.”

Before they began their journey, Laureli eased Belleza up beside Court. She leaned across the short span of space separating them and touched her mouth to his in a tender kiss. “Court, no one must know what happened between us yesterday. If one of my proverbial guardians found out—God forbid that Poppy find out—you’d probably be lynched. The time that we spend together will have to be stolen. I am expected to remain pure and virginal and untouched until the night of my marriage.”

“And you think, Laureli,” he replied, his hand darting roughly to her auburn tresses, entwining his fingers through them, ‘‘that I’m one of those kiss and tell fellows? Look into my eyes, Laureli—” When she hesitated, he gruffly shook her head, forcing her gaze to his own. “What I feel for you is a very private thing, and as alien to me as it might possibly have been to you before we met.”

The implication brought a sensual pout to Laureli’s mouth. That he could even harbor a doubt as to her purity was something she could not allow to continue. “You are the first man I have ever been with,” she responded quietly.

“I know that... of course, I am aware of that. What I am trying to say, Laureli, is that Wynn Garrett’s capture has been my life’s work. But now, something much more tangible has taken his place. I want you, Laureli... and if our moments together must be stolen, then so be it.”

“And it is worth the risk?”

He smiled mischievously. “You’re damned right it is!”

“And Pietra’s broom?”

She was very serious, but Court, releasing his grip on the strands of her hair, merely laughed as he coaxed his horse ahead of hers down the hill. “You’ve never seen how quickly I can move, Laureli. For you, I will gladly duck Pietra’s broom.”

Chapter Eleven

Court and Laureli rode along the trail at a leisurely pace. Occasionally, Laureli would halt Belleza and point out some trivial movement on the Brazos: a fish hopping through the currents; a barge pulled up on shore and its owners cutting firewood and tending to other needs required of a barge. As the short journey to Wildwood became a long, drawn-out trip. Court became suspicious. He halted his horse, and Laureli, who had talked nonstop of the history of Texas for the past thirty minutes, suddenly became aware of the movements of only one horse, her awn. She, too, halted, then turned toward Court on the trail.

“Why have you stopped?” He had slumped, with his elbow resting on the pommel of his saddle and his fingers drawn to his clean-shaven chin. “Do you feel weak?” she asked, returning to him, preparing, if necessary, to offer him a

helping hand.

"No," he replied thoughtfully. "I am wondering—"

"Wondering what?"

"Why you are delaying our return to Wildwood."

Laureli feigned surprise, then indignation. "I don't know what you mean. Court. If you are not interested in the history of Texas, why didn't you say so? If I am annoying you, you need merely point it out to me."

Court straightened in the saddle, then eased his gelding up beside Laureli's spirited mare. "If there are any surprises awaiting me at Wildwood," he said, the threat in his voice disguised behind softly spoken words, "then you'd better tell me now."

Guilt rose in Laureli as she met his almost trusting gaze. Her sensual mouth parted as though to speak, but immediately became a thin line. She lowered her gaze, and her gloved hand eased toward Court's. But he withdrew his hand and would not allow her to touch him.

He wasn't stupid. He was well aware that she was delaying their arrival at Wildwood because of Wynn Garrett. He didn't know yet whether it was because the man he knew as Gye Bedford had died, or because Laureli had posted a thousand armed men to protect him from Court. Whatever the reason. Court was sure he would be mad as hell when they reached Wildwood. He wondered how far she would go to protect Garrett, and in that moment he became very aware of the absence of his saddlebags and the portfolio he had spent seven years compiling. Would she go so far as to sabotage his evidence? Was that the reason for her delay?

In that moment, meeting his very patient but suspicious gaze, Laureli decided that, just this once, a little lie wouldn't hurt. "Court, Wynn is not at Wildwood." Those gray-black eyes narrowed intimidatingly. Laureli felt a foolish stammering beginning to collect in her throat. "No, I have not spirited him away from you forever. I merely wished to place him in an environment where he will not feel threatened. If he sees you every day, he will lose his will to live."

"He does not deserve to live," Court reminded her, painfully taking her wrist, despite her protests and her efforts to extract it from his grip. "There is a picture in my portfolio of a beautiful young woman, Laureli, who is now little more than a vegetable. She is twenty-four years old and for the rest of her life—whether it ends tomorrow or seventy years from now—will be spent lying on a bed, in a stupor that our family physician says is a coma. Her hands and her feet are twisted—" A lump choked in his throat. "Her flesh, frequently scarred by bed sores that ooze pus and blood, is like an oiled skin pulled loosely over her bones. But sometimes her eyes move, Laureli. I don't care what the doctors say... I

believe that she thinks and she remembers and all the pain of the world is in her eyes, which are the only animated part of her. She wants to die, but her body refuses to obey her unspoken wishes. She must have her food chewed for her by a servant, just so that it can be forced down her throat."

Tears filled Laureli's blue eyes. She forcefully jerked her wrist free and her trembling palms rose to her ears. ''Stop it. For God's sake, why must you tell me this?"

''Because he did it to her, Laureli... the man you know as Wynn Garrett. A once beautiful, vivacious, spirited girl who must live in a lifeless body. And by God, before he hangs, I want him to see what he did to her."

"You cannot know he is the man! Did you witness the crime?" she half screamed at him, hearing the echo of her pained words in the silence of the winter wood.

"I did not have to see the crime to know he is the guilty man," Court replied matter-of-factly. "What he did to Colleen resulted in the birth of a child nine months after he left her a helpless cripple. The child, a beautiful little girl, has one green eye and one blue eye. She is the image of her father. She and her mother are both being cared for by her grandparents, and daily this innocent little girl must see her mother wither away, like a tree suddenly cut off from the sun."

Although tears moistened her eyes and choked in her throat, Laureli was angry with Court for spoiling the morning. Why did he have to tell her such a tragic story? They should be glad, not sad, have happy stories related, not tragic ones.

"Surely," Laureli pointed out, "in your capacity with Scotland Yard you have been assigned many cases."

"But none like this one."

"Why is this one so special?" she asked. "Was the victim," she hesitated to continue, "your wife?"

"No, she was not my wife."

Without warning, Court eased his horse ahead on the trail toward Wildwood. "Court..." Again, he halted at the sound of his name. "Tell me, for God's sake, why you are so obsessed with this case?"

In the past seven years. Court didn't have many occasions to explain what had happened. It pained him to think of Colleen and the last time—four years ago—that he had seen her; had seen the darling little girl who had held firmly to his neck and begged him not to go away again. It had been a long time since he had set foot on the soil of his beloved England, had spent Christmas and New Years with his very close-knit family. He had been traveling with the obsession of a mad man, following every tiny clue that drew him nearer and nearer to the man who had brutally assaulted Colleen.

Thirteen months ago he had met Laureli Cade. Although she had been something of a vixen, he had been attracted to her. In the times that he had not been thinking of Colleen, the little girl he himself had named Emily, and the man who had changed the course of their lives, it had been Laureli who had filled his thoughts. Yesterday, he had made her his woman, and he planned to keep it that way. She had a right to know everything there was to know.

And with that thought in mind. Court very calmly told her, “She is my sister, Laureli. Her name is Colleen McKennon. She is the youngest of my four sisters, and she was—is—my favorite. I will see Gye Bedford pay for what he did to her.”

Laureli did not attempt to shield the tears that now clung to her icy, crimson cheeks. “He is paying, Court. He is burned and in horrible pain.”

‘‘And the doctor you summoned? Does he say that he will live?” Unable to answer, Laureli merely nodded. “Then I will stay here, Laureli, until I am able to return him to England in shackles.”

“As I said,” she replied with determination, “you will have to prove to me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he is the man you are seeking.”

“And as I said,” he replied, clearly emphasizing the words as he again coaxed his horse ahead, “I will do just that.”

Little Manuel had slept late in his comfortable quarters at the back of the stables. He knew though, as he leisured away a few more minutes, allowing himself the pleasure of frolicking with the playful mongrel pup, that no matter what time he arrived at the kitchens, Pietra would not deny him his breakfast. True, she would scold him for being late and lazy, but she would begrudgingly prepare him an ample breakfast.

“So, little chica,” Manuel laughed as the pup pounced again and again, grabbing for the wad of twine Manuel had prepared as a plaything, “how did you enjoy Christmas?” The pup stood back, cocking its head as the boy spoke. Then it yapped and again lunged for the twine Manuel dangled precariously just a few inches from its head. “What is that you say?” Manuel continued to laugh as he played tug-of-war with the pup. “You did not get your Christmas present?” Immediately Manuel let go of the twine and the pup fell backward, regaining its footing almost as quickly as it had lost it. Manuel lifted the board beneath his sleeping pallet and, after giving the portrait of the beautiful lady who favored his mother a long, reminiscent look, removed the filigree chain from its secret hiding place. Gingerly he removed the watch—after all, a mere pup could not tell the time—and placed the chain around the pup’s neck. Because the fastener was broken, he eased a thin string from the ball of twine and looped it through both ends of the chain. “There,” he said, lifting the pup for a better view of its

scrawny neck, ‘‘you now have your Christmas present.”

After a few minutes more of play, the pain of hunger began to gnaw at Manuel’s stomach. Pulling on his new Christmas coat and tucking the pup beneath his arm, he moved toward the kitchens and the old Mexican woman who would prepare his breakfast and throw a few scraps to the pup.

The large townhouse overlooking Kensington park was rather gloomy this late December evening. A heavy fog shrouded the stately city of London, almost drowning out the faraway boom of the tower clock as it chimed the hour of eight o’clock.

Little Emily McKennon was glad that her nanny had finally left her bedchamber, allowing her to sneak from the covers of her canopy bed and gather her Christmas toys about her on the rug before the hearth. The dark-haired porcelain doll she had named Amy Colleen, after her mother, was her favorite, followed closely by the large Victorian dollhouse with its meticulously detailed Queen Anne furnishings. Her grandpapa and grandmama doted on her, and her bedchamber reflected their love and attentions in the grand toys and magnificent gilt and white furnishings in the large rose-colored room. Emily’s chifforobe was filled to capacity with velvet and lace frocks for the wintertime and taffetas for the summer. Her shoes and riding boots were custom made by the McKennon family cobbler, who made monthly trips to the townhouse to measure the growth of the child’s feet. There was nothing Emily could ask for that she did not already have.

Except, that is, for a mother who could hold her in her arms. That was the one thing she missed. Her little friends were brought frequently to Emily’s house by their mothers, and that was the one thing Emily envied most. Her mother could only lie in a bed, usually hidden from Emily’s view. There were times, though, that Emily was able to sneak away from her grandparents and go into her mother’s room to sit and hold her hand for the longest time, until she was caught and taken by force from the room. Her grandparents wanted only to veil her from the pain of seeing her mother, so frail and helpless and unable to give the love and attention a child would expect from her mother.

Their family physician. Dr. Elderoy, who attended to Colleen almost on a daily basis, had, from the outset, found nothing physical to cause the comatose condition in the young woman. Her neck had not been broken, nor had he been able to determine that any head or spinal injuries had occurred. But in seven years Colleen had never moved so much as a muscle, nor spoken a single word. She had merely lain there on the bed, withering away to the gaunt, skeletal remains of the woman she had once been.

Emily knew that her grandparents were entertaining the duke and duchess of

Kent this evening, and that her nanny was sound asleep in the adjoining chamber. Thus, the spry six-year-old donned her new Christmas robe and fuzzy slippers, took up her new porcelain doll and moved gingerly toward her mother's bedchamber. Colleen's full-time nurse was asleep on the cot at the far end of the room, and Emily knew, by experience, that not even a thunderstorm could awaken the matronly nurse. Thus, she pulled up a chair beside the bed and again tucked her tiny hand between the twisted fingers of her mother.

"Mama, it is Emily," she whispered. "I have come to show you my new doll." Only the sound of Emily's voice had the power to open Colleen's eyes. As usual, she stared blankly at the pert features of the child who was her daughter. But this time, there was something new and exciting and different. Emily was sure she had felt the tiniest squeeze of her mother's fingers on her hand. ''Mama, do you hear me?" Did her mother's eyes smile at her, or was the overactive imagination of the six-year-old merely playing tricks on her? Emily was about to tell her mother that she had named the doll after her, but she found herself suddenly snatched up by the matronly nurse. She gave a startled cry, dropped her doll, whose porcelain head shattered into a thousand minute shards, and in that very moment, she felt her mother firmly squeeze her hand as if to prevent the nurse from taking her child away from her.

"Don't... let me go. Miss Pitch—you nasty lady, you broke my doll! My mama wants me! My mama wants me!"

"You're a very naughty child! Now... let your mother's hand go before you jerk her off the bed."

"But I am not holding her," Emily sobbed, immediately drawing the attentions of her grandparents with a sudden loud wail. "It is Mama. Mama is holding my hand. Mama doesn't want me to go."

As quickly as they could traverse the wide, spiral staircase. Lord and Lady McKennon rushed into the room, finding the angry, overbearing nurse tugging at the child as if she were plucking weeds. Just as Lord McKennon was about to reprimand the nurse, an almost inaudible whisper echoed in the darkened chamber: "Emily..."

It no longer mattered that the duke and duchess of Kent were downstairs, and should hardly be kept waiting while a domestic squabble was being settled. Surely they would understand since they, too, had heard the loud commotion from the second floor bedchamber.

Suddenly, the nurse released the child to the arms of her grandmother, even as the child's hand remained firmly bound between Colleen's fingers. She stood there, staring at the twisted young woman lying on the large bed, her flannel nightgown much too large for her emaciated form.

Emily knew her mother had spoken; she had felt her mother affectionately squeeze her hand at the same moment. But Colleen's parents were afraid to believe what they had heard. Even as the nurse, with a frightful, disbelieving look, backed into the darkness of a corner, the elder McKennons looked at each other with bewilderment and disbelief. It could not be possible that their daughter, comatose for seven long years, had spoken.

As they stood there, tears filling their eyes, they again heard the faint echo of that beloved name: "Emily."

This time, a smile so brief as to be almost nonexistent, touched Colleen's mouth.

Court was furious when he returned to Wildwood and discovered that the portfolio was missing from his saddlebags. He had offered to unsaddle and groom Laureli's mare while she went up to the house to ask Pietra to prepare a breakfast for both of them, but now stormed out of the stables, past the astounded little stable boy who had never seen such fury, and entered the kitchens with all the brittle force of Napoleon's invaders. Laureli, scrambling eggs in a shallow frying pan while Pietra tended to the bacon, turned, started to smile, but then saw the fury darkening Court's face. She did not get a word out before he began bellowing in a voice so loud that Pietra calmly removed the pan from the stove and left the kitchens.

''What the hell did you do with it!" he screamed almost insanely, flaying his arms to add emphasis to his rage.

"What do you mean? Do with what?" The spoon she'd been using to stir the eggs became hot. She dropped it and did not give a second thought to the eggs, which had begun to burn on the bottom. She turned to him and drew her hands to her narrow hips. He, too, as if in mockery, drew his hands to his hips. Their eyes met and held. "Will you please tell me what you're talking about?"

"My portfolio..." he replied, mustering as much calm as possible. "It is missing from my saddlebags."

Now she became angry. "And you believe I took it? For God's sake, Court! I am the one who wants proof of Wynn's guilt or innocence. If your evidence would have provided that, why on earth would I take it? I told you I would not harbor a guilty man. If your portfolio gives irrefutable proof of his guilt, I would be the last person in the world to take it and hide it away!" Court crossed the room so quickly that Laureli released a startled cry when he grasped her right wrist, turned and began pulling her to the exit. She was wearing only her blouse, and the bitter cold air cut through her like a knife. She could not keep pace with his long strides, and stumbled quite frequently. Within moments, he had pulled her into the stables and only when he held up his saddlebags, their straps

unbuckled and their contents spilled to the hard-packed earth, did he release her wrist.

"There, Laureli, is the sole contents of my saddlebags: my shaving gear, some personal letters from my family, an extra shirt, socks... but damn it, my portfolio is gone! You are the only person who has rallied to the cause of Bedford, and you are the only person with a motive for taking it!"

With righteous indignation, Laureli drew her hands to her slim hips. Her eyes narrowed lethally. "And I told you I did not touch your precious portfolio," she shot back with equal vehemence. "I told you that I would not harbor a criminal and that if he, Garrett, committed the crimes you related to me, then I, as much as you, feel that justice should be served by his return to England. I swear to you —" She was amazed that he had thus far not argued with her, but stood, patiently listening to her explanation. "If someone took your portfolio I, myself, will help search for it. If it cannot be found, or the thief discovered, I will have Garrett held here at Wildwood until you can send to England for whatever documents you will need to convince me he is your man. Now... have I made myself perfectly clear?"

Neither person saw the wide-eyed scrutiny of the little stable boy from his hiding place in the corner of a stall. He knew that what he had done was wrong, but he was not sure how to undo that wrong without being punished.

Of course. Court knew she was right. He watched her pale eyes darken with anger, not guilt. Court prided himself in being a pretty good judge of people, and especially women. He could usually look into their eyes and tell when they were lying. And he could see by Laureli's wide, transfixed gaze, that she was telling the truth. Someone had taken his portfolio, but it had not been Laureli.

"Forgive me," he replied, his anger calming as quickly as it had risen. "But I ask your permission to question the men."

The unpleasant odor of manure and stale, wet hay assailed his senses. She was probably too angry to notice the odor, and it was not a place he wanted her to be right now. Just moments before they had been standing in a kitchen, filled with the aroma of bacon frying and eggs scrambling. Thus, without words. Court rested his arm across Laureli's shoulder and moved slowly toward the house, feeling her slump beneath his arm as though she did not want it there.

They had just reached the entrance to the kitchen when Court turned her to him and touched his ample mouth to her cool forehead. "Forgive me," he said simply.

Laureli stepped gingerly from his embrace and entered the kitchen. Pietra had returned and was tending the bacon and biscuits, but the eggs had burned. Thus, Laureli took up a potholder and removed the skillet from the stove. "The answer is yes," she replied after a moment.

“What?” Court’s look was full of confusion.

“You asked if you could question the men. The answer is yes. As long as you do not take them away from their duties, you may do as you please. Court. As for the breakfast I promised you, it’ll be delayed a few minutes.”

She was still a bit miffed by his unwarranted accusation. He could tell by her stiff stance. Court’s long gait closed the distance between them. While Laureli scraped the burned eggs from the skillet with a spatula. Court’s hands closed tenderly over her shoulders. He did not care that Pietra tended the bacon, pretending to ignore them. His clean-shaven cheek grazed Laureli’s hairline. “I really am sorry,” he said. “I had it so firmly implanted in my mind that if anything happened to that portfolio it would be your doing. So my first instinct was to blame you. I know you want to protect Bedford because he once saved your life, but I know you would not take what is mine, and that which will convince you of his guilt.” Court’s hands eased down the sleeves of her blouse, removing the potholder and spatula from her fingers. Then he turned her to him. When she did not look at him, his fingers moved gently beneath her chin and forced her eyes to meet his. “It is possible, I suppose,” he continued on a quieter note, “that Bedford himself discovered the portfolio and removed it from my saddlebags. Do I have your permission to search his quarters—”

“The room where he slept was almost engulfed by the fire,” she reminded him. “If he took it, it is possible that it has been destroyed.”

“There were keys in the portfolio, a brass plate on the cover, other things that would not have been completely destroyed. If he took the portfolio, then I must know if it has been destroyed. If I find no evidence that it was there, then I will know that it still exists somewhere.”

Laureli enjoyed the tenderness of his hands caressing her arms. She enjoyed the pleasant, masculine aroma of him. She loved the way he looked at her, wanting her, desiring her. Yet, it angered her that she came second in his priorities. At the moment, he desired something much more—the portfolio he had carried with him for seven years. Laureli was afraid that until he found it, she would be the second most important thing in his life. She couldn’t bear the thought of that. But was she being presumptive to believe that he cared even an iota for her? Had she simply been one of his many feminine conquests? No, she did not want to believe that. “Have Manuel help you search Wynn’s quarters. Court. Pietra and I will finish the breakfast. Will thirty minutes give you ample time?”

“I’d imagine,” he replied, only now breaking physical contact. He favored her with an apologetic smile and again left the kitchen.

Laureli was quite aware of Pietra’s suspicious scrutiny. She was aware, also, of Pietra’s disapproval that Laureli would allow Court to touch her so intimately. It

had only been her arms, for heaven's sake, and her shoulders. It wasn't as if he'd slung her to the kitchen floor and ravaged her body. Thus, Laureli, hoping to disguise her true feelings for Court so that Pietra would not run to Poppy with tales, turned smugly to the elderly servant.

"I do declare," she said, slinging pots and pans about with quite a clatter, "that Court McKennon really thinks he's something. Throwing his orders around, thinking he can woo me with sweet words, and threaten me in the same tone with harassment. You've got to help me figure a way to get rid of him, Pietra, before he turns all of Wildwood topsy-turvy in his search for poor Mr. Garrett and his devil-be-damned portfolio!"

Pietra's suspiciously pinched features showed no indication of change. But suddenly a smile touched her darkly tanned mouth. ''You do not like Senor McKennon, eh, senorita?" She began arranging the strips of fried bacon on a wire rack. "I have never seen you so hotheaded over an hombre. Do you tell old Pietra the truth?"

Crimson rose in Laureli's winter-paled cheeks. "Pietra! I would not deceive you... not you... for you can always see through me! I swear, I think he is the most outrageous man in the world, and I will be glad to see him leave Wildwood. He is probably a... a womanizer and a vagabond. He may sound properly educated, but it is a facade surely. He has probably bluffed his way through the richest of societies, and no one was ever the wiser!"

Pietra's grin widened. "Except us, eh, senorita? We—you and I—know what he is. And if Pietra can help you to be rid of this troublemaker, then Pietra will see what she can do."

In her surprise at the old servant's words, Laureli almost let the eggs burn again. Quickly she removed the pan from the fire and began stirring the eggs. Of course, Pietra was powerless to chase Court away from Wild-wood if he was determined to stay. But why disillusion her when she merely wanted to help. Therefore, Laureli replied, "You're a dear, Pietra. I certainly will appreciate anything you can do."

"I could begin by serving him a very distasteful breakfast," she laughed.

Laureli joined in her laughter. "Not this time, Pietra. I am too hungry myself. Besides, if we begin a campaign too soon, he might grow suspicious."

In the moment of silence that followed, as Pietra puffed up with pride that her offer of assistance had been accepted, Laureli found herself staring dreamily through the one large window of the kitchen. She could see just the corner of the stables, and the corral where Belleza pranced in the morning breeze. Absently, she approached the window, then lightly supported herself with her palms on the windowsill. She was given a better view of the spirited mare and watched with

pride as she controlled the corral, prancing among the other mares as if she were captain of the brigade. Laureli was suddenly reminded of the white stallion and of her obsession for it. She remembered the story Court had told her, wondering if he spoke the truth, or was merely repeating a story he had heard on the Brazos before reaching Wildwood. She had seen the stallion too many times to believe in ghosts. Such apparitions were creatures of the night, but Laureli had seen the stallion in the early morning twilight, and in the evening, when the sun was just beginning to set. And never once had she seen a boy riding the stallion. She knew of no boys along the river referred to as Sam. There was Samuel Pitkin, but he was in his late forties. There had once been a Sam at Wildwood, about the time when Laureli had been born, but he had been gone for many years. Even to this day, her family still spoke of him, wondering where he had gone and whether he had a family. There were even speculations that he had died, because the family was sure he would have tried to contact them once he had matured and realized how much they had loved him. But never in all these years had Sam been seen or heard from.

Laureli continued to watch the horses, thinking of the stallion, and the long-lost boy named Sam. For some reason, she thought of her Uncle Jessie. For the first time in all these years, Laureli recalled that never once had she heard Uncle Jessie mention Sam. When the subject had been brought up among other family members, Jessie had quietly got up and left the room. It was as though he hadn’t wanted the constant reminders of the boy named Sam. Could he be the one person in all the world who knew what had become of him?

Laureli decided that she would find out. The next time she saw her Uncle Jessie she was going to ask him, point-blank, about Sam. His expression would tell all. Perhaps the mystery of twenty years could finally be solved.

She may have continued in her thoughts if she had not seen Court move into her line of vision, his blackened hand resting lightly on the slumped shoulder of little Manuel, whose dark skin was also blackened. They had apparently concluded their search of Wynn’s burned-out quarters and Laureli wondered what had been found.

The pup nipped at the heels of its young master, and Laureli, in the early morning light, caught an almost diamondlike glimmer at the pup’s neck.

What had Manuel taken now to adorn his beloved pet?

Chapter Twelve

For the following week Court’s moods shifted between somber brooding over the lost portfolio and fury manifested by frustration in not being able to discover the whereabouts of Gye Bedford. In that week he all but ignored Laureli, paying attention only to the times she left Wildwood and following her at a distant pace,

hoping she might lead him to Bedford. But always she led him on wild-goose chases, and he imagined that she was getting great satisfaction out of it.

The men had been helpful, but they had not been able to offer a clue as to the whereabouts of the portfolio. There had been no evidence of it in Bedford's burned-out quarters, so Court assumed that it had not been destroyed. It was somewhere on the grounds of Wildwood, and he was determined to find it, at all cost. He had formed a close friendship with the little stable boy, but the boy himself frequently hid when he heard Court calling to him. Guilt rested on the child's conscience, but the guilt was not great enough to compel him to relinquish his treasures. He hoped that his new adult friend might lose interest, though he had not shown any signs of doing so as of yet.

So, during the day Court continued his hunt and dogged Laureli's every movement, and at night he twisted restlessly in his sleep in the bunkhouse, his mind far, far away in England. He was homesick, more so than ever now that he had found the man responsible for Colleen's condition. He wanted to see his parents, Lord and Lady McKennon, his sisters, and little Emily, who in his rare visits had doted on his every attention given to her. He even missed that blasted London fog that obscured the vision of its inhabitants, that American Easterners joked about when they returned from visits to England.

But right now, lying in his bunk, his palms tucked beneath his head, and the half-healed wounds on his back itching like mad, Court felt another longing. He wanted to feel soft, supple, feminine flesh against his body. He wanted to breathe deeply of the sweet aroma of perfumed hair and taste the wine-sweetened mouth of the Texas lovely who had captured his heart, who had wooed and won him with a mere glance of angry blue-white eyes and a cryptic tone that had compelled him to drag her across shrubbery and hold her close to him. He wanted to be with Laureli Cade, for their bodies to fuse in wonderful longing.

But he closed his eyes tightly and tried not to think about her. He was angry with her for withholding the whereabouts of Gye Bedford, and his obsessions of the past week had exhausted him. Thus, he forced her from his mind and willed himself to sleep, unaware that in less than an hour she would leave the house and make haste to the cabin where the man she knew as Wynn Garrett was hidden.

Jan Walker had brought news to Joe that Garrett had taken a turn for the worse and that Laureli should be notified. But he could not leave his card game at the bunkhouse, especially while he was winning, without drawing the suspicions of the tall Englander fighting sleep across the large room. So, he had waited until he was sure that Court McKennon was asleep before discreetly leaving the bunkhouse and moving at a fast pace toward the big house.

Ilona, rubbing her sleepy eyes, answered Joe's rap at the foyer door. She

immediately summoned Laureli, then returned to the sleeping chamber she shared with her little girl.

"What is it, Joe?" She had been catching up on business ledgers in the study, and was still dressed in her riding clothes.

"Jan Walker brought news that Garrett's taken a turn—"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Consuelo thinks he's dying. You better come quickly."

"But McKennon—"

"Don't worry. He's sacked out. Doesn't even know I've left the bunkhouse."

Laureli hurried out to the stables with Joe and waited while he saddled her horse. Before she mounted, she asked Joe, "Go out to the bunkhouse and make sure he's still asleep."

Joe crossed the fifty yards of earth and peered through the window into the dimly lit interior of the bunkhouse. Seeing Court asleep, he nodded, and Laureli quickly sprang into the saddle. She would go first to the cabin, then, if necessary, she would ride for Brazoria to bring back the doctor.

For the first time in a week Belleza galloped away from Wildwood without Court McKennon being the wiser.

When Jan Walker had returned more than three hours ago, and no one had appeared from Wildwood, Consuelo had sent him to Little Wildwood for Tia and Poppy. They had arrived at the cabin less than a minute after Wynn Garrett died.

Tia and Poppy entered the dimly lit interior and found Consuelo sitting beside the body, her fingers resting lightly on the pulse of his left wrist. Consuelo had seen too much death to be terribly moved by this one. She had seen him suffer from the excruciating burns that had seemed to be healing, then suddenly take a turn for the worse, which, that afternoon, had culminated in his death, even as her fingers rested on his pulse.

Consuelo rose, hugged her shawl to her and moved matter-of-factly toward her parents. "He is dead," she informed them, shrugging her shoulders as if it did not matter one way or the other. "I don't know what happened. He seemed to be getting better, then—poof!—just like that, he began to talk out of his head and died. I sent word to Wildwood but nobody came."

Poppy's pale blue eyes narrowed. He recalled his several conversations with Pietra during the week in which she had told him that Laureli wanted Court McKennon away from Wildwood. But Poppy had seen Court's interest in his granddaughter and, likewise, Laureli's interest in him. Poppy did not like the idea of Laureli in the arms of such a man. In the split second that it took him to recall the conversations with Pietra, Poppy's mind concocted a sure-fire way to get rid of Court McKennon.

‘‘Quickly, Jan...” The younger man approached. ‘‘Get a shovel and begin digging a grave in that clearing behind the cabin.”

Only now did Tia speak. “What are you doing, Mojon?”

Poppy turned and gruffly took his wife’s shoulders. “Don’t you see? If Court McKennon knows he is dead, he will stay at Wildwood and, God forbid, Laureli will fall into his clutches. But if we tell him that he fled and that he told Consuelo that he would go to—damn, Arizona, California—anywhere—if he could get away, then Court McKennon will go after him. We’ll be rid of him, once and for all.”

‘‘Oh, I see... he will resume his search, and because the man is dead, he will never find him, and he will never return to Wildwood. But Laureli—”

Poppy’s grip tightened. “She is not to know. When—if—she arrives here, she must be told that Wynn Garrett had been tricking Consuelo by letting her think his condition had worsened. We’ll simply tell her that he stole Jan’s horse and got away. And Joe’s not to know either. He’s become too friendly with the bounty hunter.”

‘‘But Jan’s horse—it is tied just outside.”

Poppy turned Tia away from him. “Then, woman, we’ll remedy that right now. I’ll haul you up on that critter, and you ride him to Little Wildwood.”

Tia simply shrieked. “No... not me... at my age. I have not ridden a horse in forty years. No, Mojon, you cannot make me! I will be killed... worse, I will be whipped off the beast by a branch or something! Let Consuelo go! She is much younger.”

“And Laureli would be suspicious to find Consuelo gone, and you here in her place. Don’t worry. You cannot be hurt. The trail is clear between here and Little Wildwood.” Even as she protested and tried to hold back, Poppy was shoving her out the door, and soon his hands on her ample rump were pushing her laboriously into the saddle of Jan Walker’s horse. Poppy hit his hat to the tail end of the horse and it took off, the shrieking Tia only now gaining control of the mare’s direction.

Consuelo, holding a lantern, stood with Jan and Poppy while they dug a shallow grave, going over their instructions in her head so that she would have them firmly implanted in her mind before Laureli arrived. Soon, Wynn Garrett’s body was rolled inside the sheet and blanket that had covered his burns for the past week, and he was brought outside and lowered into the grave. Poppy said a few words in respect of the Englishman he had scarcely known, then pine straw was gathered and thrown over the firmly packed dirt.

“Sorry to have to do this, Jan.” Poppy drew back his fist and hit Jan very hard across the jaw. If that did not confuse the dazed Jan, Poppy then put his hand out

to the man sitting on his rump in the mud to help him up. “Laureli has to be convinced that the Englishman stole your horse.”

“Yeah, sure...” Jan replied, rubbing the aching jaw.

They had scarcely reentered the cabin when Laureli’s fast-moving horse was heard on the soft, wet earth.

She rushed into the cabin, surprised to meet the matching blue eyes of her grandfather. “What are you doing here?”

Consuelo, as instructed, began to wail and hugged a handkerchief to her face as she forced tears to her eyes. “It is all my fault, Laureli. He acted as though he was getting worse and I was afraid he was dying. I sent Jan to Wildwood to tell Joe. When I went out to get fresh water at the creek, Mr. Garrett had taken Jan’s extra clothing and when he heard Jan returning, he hopped up, ran outside and popped Jan a good one. He stole his horse and rode away... clop, clop, clop... very fast, to the north, I believe.”

Laureli was accustomed to her Aunt Consuelo’s theatrics, but she seemed genuinely emotional. She cut her look to Jan, and then to Poppy. “’Tis true, granddaughter,” Poppy said, half flinching as he confirmed the lie. “I was just riding up when I saw Jan’s horse disappear on the trail. I didn’t know what was happening until I got to the cabin, and Jan here told me he’d been struck a good one and his horse stolen.”

Jan’s jaw was quite red and sure to raise a bruise by morning. “See, he really cut me a good one, miss. And I didn’t even see it coming. I’m real sorry that he got away.”

Little Manuel had chosen a very strange moment to let his conscience get the best of him. He had been playing with his pup in his dimly lit room in the stables when he began going through the portfolio he had taken from Court’s saddlebags. With tear-moistened eyes, the thin boy gathered all the papers, the daguerreotype of the pretty woman, and the two brass keys that had been tucked into a niche in the portfolio and moved slowly toward the bunkhouse. The men were accustomed to his coming and going, so they paid little attention to him now.

Momentarily, Manuel knelt by the lower bunk where Court slept. He nudged his shoulder and, failing to gain a response, nudged him even harder. ‘‘Senor Court... Senor Court...”

Court was slow in awakening. The boy nudged him again, much harder than it would have seemed possible for the slim boy. “What is it, Manuel?” he asked, throwing his feet to the floor.

The boy rose from his knees and sat beside Court. Then he eased the portfolio onto Court’s lap. Tears traced gentle rivers down his tanned cheeks. “It was me

who took this—” Court stared at the portfolio as though he feared he were still asleep and dreaming. Then he cut his eyes to the emotional boy and instinctively drew him into the paternal protection of his arm. “But why, Manuel? Why would you have taken it?”

Tenderly, the boy’s hands moved to open the portfolio. He held the likeness of Court’s sister. “She is so beautiful, senor, like my mother who is dead. I looked at her every night, and it was like my mother was with me again.” Then the boy’s fingers moved through the pages of engraved letterheads. ‘‘And the pretty things, all entwined like the vines that grow on the house, they look like the golden sky. Everything is so beautiful... and I wanted something beautiful for my own.”

Just at that moment, the pup yapped at Manuel’s feet. Court picked him up. ‘‘But you have something beautiful, lad. You have the pup who loves you. There is no more beautiful treasure that you can ask for than love.” Just then Court spied the fine gold chain around the pup’s neck. It looked familiar, though its ends were held together with twine when he could actually envision a fine gold clasp. “Where did you get this?” he asked, feeling the coolness of it between his fingers.

“You will not take it from me, will you, Senor Court?” the boy questioned.

“No, I promise. I merely wish to know where you got it.”

The boy dug into the pocket of his trousers and his hand brought up the gold filigree watch. “It was with this. Senor Garrett—I saw him bury it behind the stable on Christmas Day.”

With trembling hands. Court took the watch. Moisture shone in his eyes as he remembered another Christmas, ten years ago, when he had placed the watch on its fine gold chain around the neck of his fourteen-year-old sister. “If I promise to give this back to you, little man,” Court said, choking back the lump in his throat, “could I borrow it from you for now?”

Manuel’s dark eyes raised to Court’s. “You mean, I may keep it?”

“Yes, and when I give it back to you I will give you this picture, also,” he continued, touching his fingers in a gentle caress over the features of the daguerreotype of his sister, “so that you can always be reminded of your mother who looked like her.”

Manuel hugged him tightly, then took the pup, coaxed it to the floor and skipped from the cabin with Court’s promises brightening his small face.

Joe had watched intently from his place at the card table. But now he dropped a lousy hand of cards, pushed his chair back and approached Court. ‘‘Is that what you’ve been looking for?”

“Yes,” Court replied. ‘‘And this—” He showed Joe the watch. “The lad saw

Wynn Garrett bury it behind the stable on Christmas Day—probably after he discovered who I was. It belonged to my sister."

"Then he is your man."

"Yes," Court replied, his mouth pressed into a tight, angry line. "I never had any doubts about it myself."

Joe turned and resumed his position in the card game. But he could not concentrate. His thoughts were on the Englishman, whose dark eyes scanned through the pages of the recovered portfolio, and moistened when they again scanned the lovely figure of his baby sister.

Court sat for the longest while, going through the portfolio, reading page after page as though it were all new to him. He stared at Colleen's picture so hard that he was sure it would fade beneath his very lonely scrutiny. He smoothed the gold filigree of the watch between his fingers, feeling its coldness—the one tangible thing that would convince Laureli that the fugitive she was harboring was the man he had been trailing for seven years.

He wasn't sure how it happened or what actually brought it on, but Court suddenly pulled on his boots, which he'd thrown beneath the bunk, pulled on a shirt and rose so quickly that he almost lost his balance. His chiseled masculine features were dark with rage, and the fury in his eyes as they met the men at the table drew silence. Even the shuffling of the cards stilled as each man, in turn, met Court's critical scrutiny. Then Joe silently came to his feet.

"What's the trouble, McKennon?"

Court said nothing for a moment. He was so angry that his words were scattered through his head, refusing to form into a sensible sentence. His memories were filled with the innocence of Laureli's upturned eyes, his heart with the seductive beauty of her. But his mind felt only outrage and without thinking, he blurted out, ''Why the hell should anything be the matter? I've been deceived by a damned, conniving female!"

With that, Joe pounced, overturning the card table and scattering the men. Court suddenly found himself pressed up against the bunkhouse wall with powerful hands wrapped around the collar of his shirt. The eyes of the older man were glazed with fury.

''You say one thing about Miss Laureli and I'll kill you, McKennon!"

Court tried to pry his fingers loose, but the foreman was too strong for him. "Why the hell should you care what I think?" he managed to say, gasping as Joe's clutching fingers eased toward his neck. "You're nothing to her but a foreman—a servant! She thinks of no one but herself! She's self-centered and self-serving!"

One of the men tried to coax Joe off him, but Joe elbowed him away. "You

swell-headed English bastard! That night after she got ol' Johnny Raines off you when he was beatin' you, she rode out to his place with the same whip he used on you. She sat atop her horse and she popped that whip at Johnny till she had him crawlin' on the ground and cryin' for mercy. She raised blisters that Johnny's still scratchin' at, I'd imagine. So—" Before releasing him, Joe forcefully slammed Court against the wall. "Like I said. You ever say anything against Miss Laureli again, and they'll be the last words you say." Joe wiped his hands on his leather vest as repulsively as if he'd soiled his hands on a mud-slicked swine. ''You don't like the way Miss Laureli does things, then you go back to wherever it is you belong. I imagine under a rock somewhere."

Court considered himself properly reprimanded. As he absently straightened the lapels of his shirt and began fastening the buttons, he thought of what Joe had just said. He wanted to apologize, but the foreman, now exiting the bunkhouse, did not give him the opportunity. The other men stared at him as if they, too, would like to pounce and kill. Court knew he was not in friendly surroundings. Thus, tucking his shirt into his trousers, he picked up the portfolio and moved to the cold clearing between the bunkhouse and the stable. It was only the third day of the new year, 1858, and he'd already broken every resolution he'd made.

He looked up at the big house, wanting to go there and apologize to Laureli. But it was late, way past midnight, and the morning would afford ample opportunity for apologies. Perhaps now that he had the evidence he needed, she would divulge the whereabouts of Gye Bedford.

Because his popularity at the bunkhouse had severely diminished in those few minutes it took to prove himself a total ass. Court saddled his horse and rode out to the small line shack up from the Brazos. He was all too familiar with the small room and moved confidently through the darkness, finding the logs, which he threw in the hearth, adding a few sheets of oiled rags and groping along the mantel for the matches. Soon, he had a warm fire going, a fire that matched the one blazing in his eyes.

He did not move when he heard an approaching horse. Presently the door opened and Joe stepped in. ''I want to apologize, McKennon," he said. "It's just that I get real riled up when folks run down Miss Laureli. She's a good woman. If she protects Wynn Garrett then she truly believes he's innocent."

"He's not innocent," Court replied quietly, drawing his knee up to the chair where he sat.

''And if that turns out to be true, McKennon, I'll be the first one to help you bring him to justice. If Miss Laureli is wrong, I'll be mad as hell that she's harbored a criminal, and I won't like the injustice she's done you either. Just

remember that I'll stand beside you if Garrett's your man. You can count on me." Joe turned and quietly left the cabin.

Seconds later. Court listened to the retreating hoofbeats of Joe's horse.

Laureli was sick at heart. As she rode silently along the road, hearing the rumble of the wagon carrying Poppy, Consuelo, and Jan behind her, she tried to figure out what she was going to tell Court. He was bound to believe that she had deliberately let Wynn escape, and she was not sure if she had the power to convince him otherwise. But that did not tear at her conscience as viciously as the thought of losing Court, and losing him because of her own wrongdoing. If she had kept Wynn at Wildwood, his escape could not have been made passible. But she kept only one man posted at the small cabin, and it was her own fault that he had escaped.

She couldn't bear the thought of Court leaving, though she knew he would not end his search until he again had Wynn in his custody. Consuelo had told her that Wynn had mentioned the Arizona territory, or California. She had even mentioned San Francisco, which would certainly narrow down the area of Court's search. In a way, Wynn had allowed himself to be caught by isolating himself at Wildwood. If Laureli were to venture a guess, and if, indeed, California was his destination, then he would mingle into the larger crowds of San Francisco. The trail would not be too hard for Court to follow. A man burned as badly as Wynn would be easy to trail. Everyone he met would notice him, and Court was bound to run into someone who had seen the man matching his description.

The problem, though, was an immediate one: how to tell him that his prey had escaped. As she rode through the dark, chilly night, she marveled at the very idea that Wynn had had the strength to arise, let alone crack Jan's jaw so that he could steal his horse. Fear must have greatly manifested itself in the Englishman who had risked his own life to save her from a peril. Even now, knowing that guilt had probably sent him out into the Texas wilderness, Laureli still felt the strange bonding that had formed that late November evening—the same night she had met Court. Strange, ironic, that they should have been so close that night, and yet so far apart. Court had driven the wagon away from Wildwood that night, leaving behind not only a woman who had bathed in the fiery warmth of his stolen kiss, but also the man he had been obsessively tracking for seven long years.

Fate had thrown Laureli and Court together. She could not, would not believe that the mission that had sent him around the world would part them forever.

In his condition, Wynn would not get very far. She knew that in a matter of days or weeks or, God forbid, months. Court would have him back in his

custody.

Was the wonderful day of intimacy and lovemaking Court and Laureli had shared powerful enough to draw him back to Wildwood once his mission had been completed? Would he return to her arms, a whole man again, not torn between his obsession to punish Wynn and the special love he held in his heart for Laureli?

Gently, Laureli coaxed her mare ahead on the trail. The wind stung her cheeks, turning her tears to ice. She could scarcely see the blur of the pine trees gently swaying all around her, like large black creatures against the azure sky.

Oh, Courty Court... please believe how sorry I am. Please believe how much I love you.

As soon as they entered the Wildwood stable, Poppy alit from the buggy and helped Consuelo down. Jan took care of the team while the two women moved toward the house. Poppy moved on a deliberate course toward the low-lying bunkhouse to give Court the bad news. But Poppy encountered Joe leaning against an outside wall smoking a hand-rolled cigarette.

‘‘What’s brought you here, Poppy?”

“Garrett,” Poppy replied, approaching, refusing the tobacco Joe held out to him. ‘‘Where’s McKennon?”

“The Englisher ain’t here,” Joe said. “Kind of riled us fellas out here up, and we run him off for the night.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Out to that line cabin. I’m sure he won’t go much further, since ol’ Garrett’s still around.”

“Well, he ain’t still around. Took off about an hour ago on Jan’s horse. Laureli wanted to talk to McKennon, but I’d better tell her he’s not here right now.” Poppy turned, but immediately turned back when Joe spoke his name.

“Poppy, them papers the Englishman was lookin’ for. They turned up tonight. Seems the little’un—the orphan boy—had taken them. That night Garrett was burned, the boy saw him bury something behind the stables. It turns out that it was a watch and chain that belonged to the woman Garrett is supposed to have —” Joe cleared his throat. “Well, you know.”

Poppy frowned. So, Court had been right about Garrett, and Laureli had been wrong. She was usually a much better judge of character than that. Poppy was sure her mother, Mariah, would have seen through the guise of innocence that Garrett had portrayed. He could not excuse Laureli’s naivete; she was, after all, quickly passing the marrying age and should have been as wise as her mother at that age.

Poppy tipped his hat as he departed. When he entered the foyer of Wildwood,

he saw that Laureli had freshened up and had changed into the blue velvet gown that so beautifully matched her eyes. She had swept her auburn hair up into combs on one side, allowing the long tresses of the other side to sweep across her left shoulder. She looked stunning, and he was sure she had dressed in her finery so that she could more efficiently assure Court of her innocence in Garrett's escape. It was a shame that such beauty would have to be wasted.

"Where is he, Poppy?" Laureli asked, looking across her grandfather's stocky shoulder. "Didn't you tell him that I needed to speak to him?"

"Joe tells me he rode out about half an hour ago. Seems he and the boys got into a bit of a tiff. Joe says he rode out to the line cabin. Also tells me that McKennon's portfolio turned up and some other stuff that Garrett was supposed to have taken from his victim. Seems Manuel had all this evidence all along."

"Did Joe see it?"

"Yeah, I believe. Joe says that what he saw indicates that Garrett's the man McKennon's been dogging. I'm afraid your instincts were wrong this time, granddaughter."

Laureli was disappointed. She had wanted to see Court and to get this over with as quickly as possible. "Did Joe say what he and Court had argued about?"

"No, and I didn't ask."

Court and Joe had gotten along so well. Laureli could not believe that animosity had risen between them. "Will you trust me, Poppy, to ride out to the cabin and talk to Court?"

"Not alone," he said. ''Not this time of night." "It is my duty. Poppy, to talk to him. You may escort me, if you wish, but—and I remind you that I ask very little of you—I ask that I be given privacy to talk to Court."

"I don't want him to hurt you, granddaughter." With a small laugh, Laureli's hand fell to her grandfather's arm. "Court would never hurt me." "You were wrong about Garrett, missy." Laureli scowled. "Well, that may very well be. But I am not wrong about Court McKennon." She quickly withdrew her hand from Poppy's arm. "If you will not allow me privacy at the cabin, will you please ride out and ask him to see me here at the house? Perhaps you will let me have a little privacy in my own house."

There was, after all, the summer room, though it was kept reasonably cold this time of year, warmed only in the height of the cold weather so that the potted plants would not be killed by frost. It was separated from the house by a long corridor, and Laureli was the only person who went there when she watered the plants once a week. If necessary, she would take Court there so that they could be alone to talk. Thus, when Poppy rode out, and Jan took Consuelo back to Little Wildwood in the wagon, Laureli hurried to the summer room and lit the

fire in the corner hearth.

She had hurriedly dressed and pulled up her hair. Now that she had extra time—at least thirty minutes—she rushed up the stairs to her bedroom and touched a little color to her already crimson cheeks by lightly pinching them. She removed her combs and more carefully brushed her auburn tresses until they shone in the glow of the hearth. Hurriedly, her fingers moved through the box of combs, choosing a more suitable one to match her gown. Then she searched among the shoes and slippers in her shoe trunk and found the velvet slippers that matched the color of her dress. It seemed that much more time than thirty minutes had passed and, exhausted, she rested her hand on her dressing table. But just moments later she was rudely jarred to full wakefulness by the sound of two horses approaching. She moved to the window and saw one person alight and the other horse move off into the forest. Court ambled lazily onto the veranda and approached the foyer door.

The soundly sleeping Pietra had not stirred from her rest. Because Ilona had already been disturbed once that night, Laureli had taken the time to go up to her bedchamber to tell her that she was expecting company. Laureli rushed down the stairs, holding the hem of her gown up so as not to trip, and pulled open the door just as Court was about to knock.

As she met his bold gaze, she blushingly explained, “I did not want the other women in the house disturbed, or little Sarah to be awakened. I hope you are not displeased that I have summoned you at such a God-awful hour.”

Court boldly assessed her, resplendent in her velvet gown, her matching eyes holding his, transfixed, her hair drawn up in her comb, yet flowing in rich, thunderous masses down one shoulder. Politely, he removed his hat. “Actually, I’m angry as hell that I’ve been disturbed, but I gather that it is important to be summoned, as you say, at this God-awful hour. As you say here in America, we can kill two birds with one stone—” he continued, patting the saddlebags that he’d slung over his right shoulder. “I have some things to show you.”

“Then it is just as well we meet this evening—”

“This morning,” he hastily amended.

“Very well, this morning... we’ll both say what must be said,” she replied, stepping aside and inviting him in. He started to move toward the parlor, but her hand fell to his arm, to halt him, only to be drawn quickly away. “Not in there. I thought we would have more privacy in the summer room. I have the hearth burning.”

His dark, hooded gaze met her pale one. The unruly lock of black hair invaded his forehead and instinctively, Laureli’s hand lifted to brush it back. In doing so, Court took her hand and brought it to his mouth, tenderly kissing her palm.

‘‘Why did you do that?” she asked, though she was not repulsed by his innocent act of intimacy.

“Because,” he replied. “I spoke ill of you tonight.” ‘‘Oh? Is that what Joe was angry about?” Court shrugged boyishly. “I’m afraid so. The men certainly rally to your defense. You’re quite popular. Miss Laureli Cade. And—” He affectionately squeezed her hand. “I had no right to say what I did.”

Perhaps you will change your mind after you have learned that Garrett escaped, she thought, taking his hand and leading him down the long, dark corridor toward the glow of the summer room.

She only hoped that he would forgive her for what had happened tonight.

Chapter Thirteen

Court followed the velvet-clothed Laureli down a long corridor with which he was not familiar and into a large glass room filled with potted plants, so beautifully kept they scarcely seemed to have been affected by the winter cold. Several ficus almost touched the twelve-foot ceilings, and in the midst of the plants sat two large rattan settees. Between them sat a glass and rattan coffee table, boasting an oval silver tray, a decanter of sherry, and two crystal goblets.

The summer room was, perhaps, the most private place in the house. Although three of its sides were glass panes from floor to ceiling, an indoor garden surrounded by a high brick wall secluded the room from outside view. He saw only one gate at the left, securely locked by a heavy black-iron bolt. Then he saw the thick, plush pallet spread before the hearth, and he gave Laureli a bold, suspicious, yet not disapproving look.

Laureli blushed furiously. She had not left the pallet there. Perhaps Ilona had played with the child there in the early morning sunshine and had forgotten to roll it and put it away. The nerve of Court to think that she had spread it for a planned intimate rendezvous! Meeting the almost mischievous twinkle of his dark eyes, she was prepared to immediately set the record straight.

‘‘If you think that is for us, you’re sadly mistaken,” she explained, dropping her eyes as she sat on the settee. “I asked you here only because I have heard that your evidence has been uncovered.” It was, at least, a half-truth. She also planned to tell him that Wynn had escaped, though she would have to wait for the right moment. Perhaps the pallet, left so innocently in the summer room, would provide that right moment. ‘‘I want to see what you have.”

Sitting across from her. Court pulled the saddlebags from his shoulder and removed from it the portfolio he had compiled over a seven-year period. Silently, he opened it. placing before her, from left to right, the sketch that had been made from a firsthand description by one of Scotland Yard’s top artists, two love notes that Gye Bedford—the man Laureli knew as Wynn Garrett, and whose

handwriting she was well familiar with—had left on Colleen's windowsill, the sworn affidavit of a man who had seen them together just before the assault, and a stack of theater billets with likenesses of the man known as Gye Bedford collected along the trail of Court's pursuit. Then he removed the filigree watch from his pocket and placed it on the stack of billets.

"Have you ever seen this?" he asked her after a moment.

Laureli picked it up and studied it for a moment. It was very beautiful, and obviously, a woman's delicate, extravagant item of jewelry. "No, I haven't."

"Manuel dug it up from behind the stable on Christmas night."

Laureli's gaze shot up, meeting his narrowed one. "Manuel?"

"Yes... he had seen the man you know as Wynn Garrett bury it just moments before. Garrett—Bedford must have discovered the contents of my saddlebags and knew who I was. In his panic to destroy the one thing that could tie him to Colleen, he buried the watch, and did not know the boy was watching."

Gently, Laureli dropped the watch to the billets where Court had placed them. "And this was hers?"

"Yes, it was... it disappeared the day she was assaulted. I believe..." Court began collecting the documents together. "You now have your indisputable proof that Garrett is my sister's assailant."

Unbeknownst to Court in those few minutes that it took to put his portfolio in some semblance of order and drop the watch into his pocket, Laureli began to weep, very, very quietly. Thus he was surprised that, when he returned the portfolio to his saddlebag, his gaze met tearstained cheeks and sorrow such as he had never imagined in the spry, doubting-Thomas Laureli Cade.

Quietly, he moved around the coffee table and sat beside her. "I do not blame you," he assured her. "I know that you truly believed that he was innocent, and that I was persecuting him without cause. But you do know now that he is the man I have been searching for. And... I hope you won't mind, but I have sent correspondence to England, advising my family as to my whereabouts and to contact me here should they feel the need."

"I am sure they will be very happy that your search has ended."

"I hope they will," he replied. "I hope they will be happy about many things that will change in my future."

Unable to reply because of the painful lump in her throat, Laureli dropped her cheek against his softly pulsating chest. She felt his arm slip around her shoulder and draw her close, tenderly, lovingly, as though her unspoken joy that she would be part of his future had somehow mended all of the tension that had existed between them.

But it was a tension that would soon renew itself in violent proportions, a

tension that their feelings for each other would find insurmountable. Court's love for his little sister had sent him around the world, and now that he thought he was at the end of the trail, he would have to pick up a new scent, like a hunter trailing its prey. He might very well leave Wildwood forever. Laureli knew that Wynn would not allow himself to be caught again. If he had been strong enough to cuff Jan and steal his horse, there was little chance of his dying along his trail of retreat. Court's obsession and love for family would make him a persistent bounty hunter. He would not stop until Wynn Garrett was back in his custody.

‘‘Court?"

He had scarcely heard his name whispered so softly on her lips. ‘‘Yes."

"There is something I must tell you, about—"

Court put her slightly away from him and his index finger gently touched her mouth. "Not now, Laureli... come." He rose, coaxing her to her feet. "Sit with me on this pallet before the hearth. It is chilly here. I just want to be with you, to know that you believe in me... that you trust me." Court dropped to his knees on the pallet and coaxed her down before him. "For now, Laureli, there shall be no more talk of my sister, or Gye Bedford, or evidence and documents. I want only to enjoy your company, and for you to enjoy mine, if that is at all possible after the way I've treated you."

Laureli moved gracefully into his arms. "What are you saying, Court?" she half mumbled. "That we will live a few moments for ourselves, without the ghosts of the past?"

"Wouldn't you like that?" he queried, raising a puzzled eyebrow as he put her slightly back from him.

She was thinking of Wynn, and his escape just hours ago. If Court left now, riding Belleza, he might be able to catch up to him. But the light drizzle of rain throughout the day had probably diminished the trail. He would not be able to pick up a decent trail until the morning. And Laureli felt very selfish at the moment. She wanted to be with Court, to delay the news that would tear his feelings for her asunder, and enjoy passion-filled moments with him tonight. Tomorrow, he would be gone, and she might never see him again.

Thus, going back over the past few moments, she recalled what he had asked and replied, "I would like that, Court."

He smiled boyishly. "Then you did put the pallet here, for us?"

‘‘No," she shrugged, "I didn't, but... I'm glad it's here."

A moonbeam suddenly glistened against the east window, betraying that the weather might be trying to clear. But it was momentary, and immediately the only light in the room was that provided by the fire blazing in the hearth. Laureli sat before Court, allowing him to massage her fingers between his own. Her eyes

were moist and sad, her lips slightly parted and trembling, her fingers beneath his own suddenly clenching. Tenderly, he drew her into his embrace and massaged her slim back beneath his left hand.

‘‘What troubles you, Laureli?”

“N-nothing, Court... I want only to be with you. I cannot bear the thought of being parted from you.”

He gruffly put a breath of space between them and his powerful hands gripped her shoulders. “Then come with me—come with me to England.”

“I cannot. Wildwood is my home. I could never leave it.”

“My darling Laureli. Your life should not center on mere earth. Your love should be with a man. And a man’s love should be with a woman, not with the dirt beneath his feet. If Wildwood means more to you than England means to me, then I am willing to sacrifice my homeland to be with you.”

Laureli felt her heart drop like a dead weight. He meant what he was saying. He had not spoken the words, but he was confessing his love for her. That meant more to her than anything in the world, even her love for Wildwood.

“Court, are you saying that you love me?”

“That I adore you, I want you, I desire you... yes, Laureli, you are the woman I love. You are the one who has pierced my heart with something beautiful, something much more fulfilling than revenge. I love you, Laureli. I want you to be my wife and the mother of my children—” He wondered if he should tell her now who he truly was. Should he admit that in England they could not be known as Mr. and Mrs., but lord and lady, the same as his parents, and his grandparents? Was this the moment to reveal to her that not only had Gye Bedford been a black sheep of the family, but he, himself, by joining the forces of Scotland Yard, had gone against the grain of his father’s political plans for his future.

Court studied the lovely woman before him: her blue velvet gown with its ecru lace, her pearl-blue eyes holding him so lovingly, a disobedient lock of hair that refused to be caught up in the ivory and pearl comb, and the mass of her auburn tresses spilling across her shoulder in a cascade of sunset brilliance. He watched the flicker of flames dance upon her ivory complexion, the side against the hearth more crimson than the other. He especially noticed the buttons of her gown, how easily they would come loose, the velvet skirts lying heavily over a scant underskirt of tiered ruffles. No, now was not the time to discuss family and England and stuffy royal titles.

Court’s fingers wrapped firmly around her shoulders and drew her close. His clean-shaven jaw brushed her hairline. “How private are we here, Laureli?”

“Very private,” she replied. “We shan’t be disturbed.”

‘‘How do you know?” he whispered. ‘‘Remember Pietra and her broom—”

Laureli smiled a smile that he did not see. “I locked the corridor entrance. The garden gate is locked, also. Only if someone scales the wall outside—”

“Ah, then we are alone, you and I, and you are at my mercy.”

“Lovingly so,” she cooed against his tousled hair, her fingers, instinctively, rising to unbutton his shirt. “And the hearth is very warm. Don’t you think,” she said and pulled back, smiling wryly, “that we are both terribly overdressed?”

He allowed her to pull his shirt down his arms, a suddenly drawn breath tensing the ample muscles of his chest. “And now, shall we rid you of this cumbersome gown? It is beautiful, but—”

“But what?” she chuckled with seductive innocence.

“Too much fabric, like an ugly, barbed fence that separates the lord from his lady—”

The cringe he had felt as he had so instinctively referred to them as lord and lady went unnoticed as Laureli took his fingers and raised them to the bodice of her gown. Both hands grazed her covered breasts in their movements. Then she playfully closed her eyes and said, “I’d imagine. Court, that by the time I have counted to five, this annoying frock will lie there on the floor along with your shirt.”

He watched her eyes softly close, her face upturned, her smile widening as his fingers deftly unfastened the buttons until only one remained at her waistline. Slowly, she had counted, “One... two... three... four... five—” and the final button popped open. His hands moved fluidly beneath the fabric, reached her shoulders and eased it down her arms, leaving her covered only by a filmy chemise loosely gathered at her neckline and an underskirt of equally filmy ruffles. Beneath that his eyes beheld only the seductive curves of her willing flesh.

Court eased to his buttocks and kicked off his boots. He then stretched just enough to retrieve the silver tray with its decanter of sherry and goblets from the table. Reclining lazily, with his head perched on his palm, he coaxed Laureli to lie beside him. Slowly, he poured each of them a goblet of sherry and offered her one of them. But she stretched to her full height on her back and perched the goblet precariously on her flat stomach.

“Let it go,” Court dared, chuckling lightly, ‘‘and see if it topples from its lovely perch.”

“Oh? You think that I won’t?”

“I think not,” he laughed. “And if it does... then I may drink the wine from wherever it may glow.”

Laureli sucked in a deep breath and held it, then slowly removed her hands from the stem of the goblet. Although it swayed above the gentle movements of her abdomen, it did not topple over. Although she was a little disappointed, the

chuckling Court took the goblet, raised her head with his other hand and held the liquid to her lips.

Then he took her goblet and placed it beside his own untouched one. He gently traced a line down the bridge of her straight nose, allowing his fingers to pause at her mouth to be kissed in turn.

“You are so beautiful,” he said, touching his mouth to her sweet one, feeling her delicate breath whisper across his cheek. “What is this wild, wonderful thing that has thrown us together?”

“Fate,” she replied, meeting his loving gaze. “Our destinies were meant to cross.”

Suddenly, her brow was pinched with worry and her mouth was thinned with guilt. Yet a tremor swelled within her, and she pulled him close to her, feeling the iron-hard, masculine length of him cover her slim, scantily clothed body. The tremor surfaced and shook her body, and he pulled slightly away, a little confused.

“Are you afraid of me, Laureli? To tremble so?”

‘‘Of course I’m not!” she replied hastily. “Someone must have stepped on my grandmother’s grave.” She tried to smile, but it was forced, and he was quite aware of it. Thus, she eased upward and into his arms, holding him so tightly that he was sure his wind was being cut off. ‘‘I just want to be with you. Court. Do not ask questions. Do not think that I am afraid of you. I could not possibly be afraid of the man—the only man—who has taken my heart, who has shared something with me so wonderful that the face of no other man will ever touch my memories. You, Court, are the man I want. If you want me, I am yours.”

‘‘You will be my slave then?” he whispered huskily.

Only now did she draw back, to meet his humored gaze and share one with equal intensity. “No... but you may be mine. And now, my darling, lie beside me. Do you not want me?”

How seductively beautiful she was; how innocent in her proposal! Court’s body tensed with desire for her. His mouth flamed with a need to meet hers. His hands trembled as they caressed her smooth flesh beneath the filmy fabric, easing beneath the bodice to capture the treasure of smooth twin peaks that became hard and unyielding beneath the masterful massage of his hands.

“Want you,” he murmured between his teasing kisses, scarcely able, in the heat of his desire, to remember her last spoken words. His hands eased beneath the thin fabric at her shoulders, his fingers entwining there, caressing a deliberate trail down her arms. With his hands held prisoner by the silken fabric, his mouth imprisoned her firm breasts one at a time, moving slowly to the pulsing hollow at her neck. She breathed deeply, unable to move her hands because they were

bound by the fabric against his own, and she wanted to taste the sweetness of his mouth, to bathe in the musky aroma of him. How tenderly he touched her, caressed her, possessed her. How patiently he coaxed her body into the heat of passion when his body betrayed its hunger for her.

Court's hands were frantic to feel their naked flesh united. By instinct, he disengaged his hands and quickly removed her filmy underclothing, taking it the length of her body in one easy movement. Wild and wonderful sensations attacked their senses in unison, sending fevered intensity throughout their bodies, spasms of thrills that could not be controlled by common sense, nor the grim news that Laureli would very soon have to relay to the man she had loved at first sight.

Laureli enjoyed the soothing, wondrous stroking of his hands as they connected to her passion-warmed flesh. She nuzzled against his neck, then drew slightly back so that their darkened gazes could meet and hold and sensually betray the breathless desire that was so precariously suspended between them.

He gracefully rose and slipped out of his trousers. He teased her with brief kisses, nipped her earlobe, brushed her hair back so that he could feel the warmth against her hairline. Then, in one scarcely noticeable move—indeed, he had suspended Laureli in a wondrous vacuum of passion and desire—he tantalizingly topped her, branding the aroused tips of her breasts with intoxicating skill. As their bodies blended to seek fulfillment, Laureli rose to meet his wickedly wonderful motions.

Taut and inflamed. Court could no longer maintain his painful self-control, which vanished as her mouth sought his and her breasts burned against his massive chest. With total concentration, his fevered movements coaxed her thighs apart and they wonderfully, erotically connected, her body shuddering as it was filled with the commanding power of him.

The sweet receptacle of her body became a radiant paradise as they moved together on the winds of love and passion, alive with want, taut with ecstasy as their gazes fused and locked, and their bodies shuddered in blissful torment. For moments that seemed like hours they hurled wildly, unable to stop and catch a much-needed breath. As she cooed kittenishly at each exit, he gasped, then stiffened, and they pulsated together with unrestrained passion until he took one final plunge, and their fulfillment reached a pinnacle that brought them back from the ethereal plane with an earth-shaking thud. Then they could only cling together in exquisite exhaustion.

As their breathing slowed in unison. Court moved from her and fell lazily to his back. Anxious to regain the intimacy, Laureli quickly drew on her filmy undergarments and moved against the manly length of his body. The hot male

smell of him assailed her senses with erotic remembrance, and she clung to him as if she feared losing him.

Slowly, his arm closed over her shoulder and he shook it playfully. “You have reduced me to a mere weakling,” he whispered hoarsely. ‘‘You could beat me senseless and I would be powerless to stop you.”

Laureli snuggled against him. ‘‘I would rather love you,” she replied softly. “I would rather lie beside you all the rest of our days and never move. I love being next to you, like this. Oh, Court—” A sudden vibrancy came to her voice. ‘‘It almost doesn’t seem real, being with you, lying beside you and knowing that we have—” She hesitated, cutting her gaze away from his humored one.

“That we have made love?” he replied. “Twice? Haifa dozen times, if you count each time on a certain day last week. Don’t be embarrassed, Laureli, to speak about lovemaking. It is natural and beautiful.”

With total concentration, Laureli’s gaze again lifted to his waiting one. “Court?”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever been married?”

Without warning, he broke the contact of their bodies and scooted to his side, supporting his head in the palm of his hands. ‘‘Why on earth would you think I’d been married?”

‘‘I don’t know.” She shrugged. “It’s just that you’re, well, much older than I am. If you haven’t, I am wondering why.”

Court chuckled. ‘‘So much older, yes, perhaps, all of thirteen years your senior. I have not married, Laureli, because the right woman never came along... that is, not until now.”

“But surely, you have been with other women.”

Court’s fingers moved deftly beneath her pert chin. “Nothing matters, Laureli, but that I am with you, and my feelings are for you.”

“But if I had been with another man—”

His fingers lightly pinched her chin. “But you haven’t.”

“How do you know?”

Again, he chuckled, then drew her close to him. “Because I know, Laureli. I am the first, and I fully intend to be the only man in your life.”

Laureli’s eyes were suddenly alive with guilt. He was expressing love for her, just as she felt it for him. Still between them existed the problem of Wynn Garrett and his escape. It dawned on Laureli that he would believe their lovemaking tonight had been simply another way to stall, while Wynn put a greater distance between himself and Wildwood and Court McKennon.

Thus, she merely jerked from Court’s arms and drew to her knees. Absently,

she moved and handed him his trousers. Confusion pinched his features. Tears had filled her eyes and she drew back, as though she were repulsed by him.

"What is the matter, Laureli?" As he pulled his trousers on and fastened them, he watched her rise tremorously from her knees, then turn her back to him. Visibly shaking, her disheveled hair quivered down her back in thunderous masses.

She listened to Court, who dressed behind her, rose and approached her. When he attempted to take her shoulders between his gentle hands, she flung him off. The blissful torment just moments ago had changed into a raging guilt that could not be silenced within her.

''Court, I am not worthy of your love."

"Don't be ridiculous." Again he approached and took her shoulders, but this time she did not protest. Her head fell back against his shoulder. ''If it's because you doubted who Wynn Garrett was—"

"No." The word was softly spoken. She turned into his arms. "It is not because of that. It is because of—" Again, she hesitated, trying to find the right words without repulsing him, without turning his love to hatred.

"Because of what, Laureli?"

Drawing up from her slumped position, raising her hands to his strong shoulders, Laureli met him square in the eye. "Court, you mean all the world to me. I want you to know that the moments we have shared, at the cabin and here, are the most wonderful of my life. I have always dreamed of a man like you coming into my life, but—"

"But what?" When she hesitated to answer, he lightly shook her. "What are you telling me, Laureli?"

"It's Wynn Gar—Bedford. He wasn't as badly hurt as we'd thought. He..." Again consumed by guilt, Laureli dropped her eyes. "He escaped from the cabin where he was being kept. He stole a horse and—" Laureli felt the sudden revulsion in his hands as they slipped from her arms, as he put several feet of distance between them and turned away. His hands drew slowly to his slim hips and he turned back, his eyes strangely blank.

"I see... this whole charade... the hearth, the summer room surrounded by its lovely plants, the pallet before the fire... your damned flimsy undergarments... they have been your tools against me. To give Bedford a head start on the ruthless bounty hunter..."

"N-no!" Laureli half ran toward him. She tried to touch his arm but he raised his hand threateningly. "You are wrong. I did not plan this, Court. It merely happened. My God, how could you have possibly picked up a trail in this drizzle of rain? You would have had no choice but to wait until the morning. I can tell

you where Consuelo said he would go if he got away... San Francisco... that is where he will head!”

Not only was he outraged by her manipulations, but he was hurt that she should find the necessity to delay him by seducing him, by making him believe that she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. He should have gone with his first instincts: that she was a spoiled, rich little tramp who would do anything to get her own way. She had wanted to protect Gye Bedford, and that was foremost in his mind right now. As far as Court was concerned, Laureli Cade had not one single redeemable quality, except, perhaps, a willing, seductive body that had done its fair share of damage to his male ego.

So, without words, without even looking back or responding to her entreaties. Court slipped the bolt to the corridor and walked out on her. Laureli stood in shock, attempting to turn her velvet gown right side out so that she could pull it on. She tried to find her slippers, to recover from the weakness suddenly invading her knees so that she could go after him, but she was so thoroughly disoriented.

Finally, she was able to collect her thoughts and rushed down the corridor, just in time to hear the retreating hooves of Court’s rented gelding. She ran out into the drizzle of rain, frantically calling, “Court... Court—” But if he heard her he made no indication of it.

She suddenly found herself being coaxed back to the house by Poppy, who had appeared from the darkness and now held on forcefully to her arm. She struggled against him, her auburn hair plastered to her forehead and cheeks, so dazed and disoriented that she scarcely realized that it was her grandfather holding her.

‘‘Don’t worry, Laureli, he is gone now. He won’t ever bother you again.” As she half stumbled up the steps beside him, he added in all innocence, ‘‘He will never return to Wildwood to bother you because he will never find Wynn Garrett. He didn’t escape... we buried him just two hours ago in the clearing behind the Raines cabin.”

Laureli fell heavily to her knees, thrashing wildly at her very confused grandfather as he attempted to pull her to her feet. “Don’t touch me... don’t touch me!” she screamed, drawing her trembling hands to her face. “Why did you lie to me? Why did you let me lie to him?” Suddenly drained of strength, she whimpered, “Why did you make him go away?”

Poppy sucked in a ragged breath, then dropped to his knees before his granddaughter. “What are you saying, Laureli? Pietra said that you were anxious to be rid of him.”

Laureli’s tear-moistened eyes lifted to Mojon Robeson. “W-what? What are you talking about?”

“You told her just the other day that you wanted Court McKennon off Wildwood. And I—we could all see that he was interested in you.”

“You lied to me. Poppy? You lied to me about Wynn Garrett so that Court would leave... so that he could try to pick up the trail of a man who is dead?” Struggling against the short, stocky man, Laureli tried to get to her feet. “I’ve got to go after him. Poppy. I have to tell him—” She was sobbing so bitterly that she could scarcely maintain her footing. Thus, her strength gone,

Poppy picked her up in his arms and moved with her toward the divan in the parlor. She did not protest as he placed her gently on the stack of pillows. Her eyes were a blank stare, her quivering mouth slightly parted, unable to speak. Her mind was so disoriented that she could not rationalize.

She felt as though the life had suddenly drained from her body.

It had; Court was gone.

That night, after Pietra had seen Laureli to bed, she had left her warm chamber and had walked out into the light drizzle of rain. She stood there for an hour or two or three—time was of no consequence—calling Court’s name as though he were standing just a mere few feet away. Though she could not remember it, sometime in the pre-dawn hours she had returned to the summer room to lie on the pallet she had shared with Court. The fire had burned down long ago, and she cared not that the winter night coated her body in a thin veil of ice. She cared not that she was scarcely conscious when discovered by Pietra the following morning, her skin so white from exposure that Pietra ran out to the bunkhouse screaming hysterically that Laureli was dead.

A week later Laureli lay in a fevered delirium as her lungs filled with infection. Dr. Delano left his practice in Brazoria to stay with her twenty-four hours a day. For weeks she existed in a semi-conscious state, and in her very rare moments of lucidity, she called Court’s name over and over, until it blended into one long, low whimper. Poppy wanted to send word to Europe, to Laureli’s parents, but Solon was so sure she would live that he ordered Joe not to post the letter when he rode into Brazoria for medical supplies.

So, after three weeks, during which everyone along the Brazos mourned the woman they all loved and who was surely dying, Laureli decided to surprise all of them. Her fever broke, and though she was very weak, she had lost the hacking cough and was able to take small portions of Pietra’s soup several times a day.

She spent the following three weeks in her bedchamber, sitting up for longer periods each day, catching up on her reading and thinking—always thinking—about Court. If only she hadn’t gotten ill, she could have ridden after him.

She sat back dreamily against the soft pillows of her bed this mid-February day, thinking about him, wondering where he was. Though she had survived what Dr. Delano had described as an almost fatal case of pneumonia, she now felt that she

had suffered something of a setback. She'd felt very nauseous this morning, and had for several mornings now. Usually, by mid-morning she felt better, but Pietra insisted that Jan ride into Brazoria and fetch Dr. Delano. He arrived at Wildwood the following afternoon and found her sitting in the summer room before a blazing hearth. Though he didn't know it, her thoughts were only of Court McKennon, and for some strange, unexplainable reason, she had felt especially close to him in spirit these past few weeks.

"So, tell me what is troubling you?" he asked, patting her hand somewhat paternally. ''Come, let us return you to your bedchamber so that I can have a look at you. You haven't been coughing, have you?"

"No." She shrugged as she arose and did not protest his hand beneath her arm for support as they moved toward her bedchamber. "I've been feeling better every day. It's just the mornings are so draining on me, and I feel very nauseous."

As Laureli settled into her bed, she watched the elderly doctor's eyebrows meet in a worried frown. "Well, your color looks good. Your cheeks are rosy this morning."

She smiled, yet she knew that he was merely tempering her for an intimate examination, something that she very much hated. He rang the servant's bell beside the bed and Pietra soon appeared. Always, during such an examination, Solon insisted that a female member of the household be in attendance.

Moments later, Pietra was given her leave. Laureli drew herself up and allowed Solon to fluff her pillows. He looked very stern, his face free of the twinkle, the smile that usually graced his deeply lined features. He was very quiet and merely watched her as she drew the covers up to her bodice.

''Well, am I going to live, Dr. Delano?" she asked in her sweetest voice.

"You're going to live," he assured her, taking a moment to drop his medical instruments back into his black bag. "Thank God you're a very healthy girl, Laureli."

She shrugged delicately. "I've always bounced back from whatever ailment befell me." She smiled, and only now did his aging features lose the stern look.

"It's a good thing," Solon replied, the smile slowly fading. "The young man who was here... the one I am told you were very fond of..."

Laureli sighed sadly. "Court... Court McKennon. Yes, I was very fond of him. But—he's gone now—" Bitterness came to her voice. "All of Wildwood made sure of that."

There was no way to be delicate about it. "You're going to have a baby, Laureli. I'd say in a little over seven months." Solon had expected shock, but she merely stared blankly at him, as though she had not yet comprehended his

announcement. “You’ll have to remain abed and limit your intake of meals. You are much too small to deliver a large baby, Laureli.”

“I—I can’t be,” she was finally able to stammer. “You must be mistaken.”

“No, child.” He rose, patting her hand as he prepared to pick up his worn black bag. “I don’t make mistakes like this. I’ll leave a list of instructions with Pietra. You’re to follow them precisely.”

How she remained so composed as he left her alone she would never know. She lay quietly against the pillows, her hands resting in the thick folds of her coverlet, staring ahead, yet seeing nothing at all.

Then it all slapped her in the face with painful recognition. She was going to have the baby of the man who hated her.

He would never be aware that, on the large ranch beside the Brazos, his child would be growing up in the wild but loving hands of Texas.

Laureli buried her face in her hands and wept, not for herself, but for Court McKennon, chasing a ghost across the great American West.

Part Two

Chapter Fourteen

San Francisco, June, 1858

Ten years earlier San Francisco had been little more than a geographical expression. Known as Yerba Buena by those who knew of it at all, only a thousand people had lived there when an aspiring merchant named Sam Brennan had raised the cry of “gold!”

In the years to follow, San Francisco had transformed into a boomtown, while fledgling entrepreneurs, like Brennan, had flourished in the city where everything was purchased with gold dust earned through hard sweat and blood. Now San Francisco was a town of sixty thousand people living in shantytowns, rooming houses, and mansions the gold rush had spawned.

But the settlement once known as Yerba Buena had seen its share of disasters, for between 1849 and 1851 it had been razed by six disastrous fires.

San Francisco was overcrowded, and life was feverish and active. Gangs of cutthroats roamed the streets, robbing homes and businesses, and murdering citizens.

Not only did San Francisco teem with criminals, but swarms of ladies of the evening had come from New York and New Orleans, and many from as far away as France, China, Hawaii, and Chile.

For four months now Court had lived in the decadence of San Francisco. He had leisured away hours at the bawdy houses and drinking establishments.

Although his search for Gye Bedford took him to such places, he found that California furnished the worst things and the best things in America.

At present, the wild days of the California gold rush were only memories. San Francisco was, nonetheless, the premier city—the Babylon of the Far West.

Court had taken a room in a boardinghouse far up the hill, so that when he looked out over San Francisco, he saw the storehouses, towers, and steeples, its courthouses, theaters and hospitals. He could look across the bay and see the steamers, freighters, and passenger-carriers. But in his four months, and many long, tedious hours spent in the theaters of San Francisco, he had not seen one single sign of Gye Bedford. Being somewhat artistically inclined, he had taken his sketch of Gye Bedford and had sketched a like one, transforming the man into what he would look like with the degree of burns he had received. He had shown Gye Bedford's likeness to so many people in so many theaters, saloons, and brothels that the edges were frayed and merely fell apart when he unfolded the sketch.

This early Monday morning he stood on the board-plank of Montgomery Street, unpaved and deep in mud, offering precarious stepping stones for those who dared to cross to the other side. He was contemplating just such a crossing himself when he saw a man enter the office of a Dr. Jones, whose sign hung beside narrow stairs leading up the side of the building. It was a hot June day and the man was strangely wrapped in a long wool scarf, the only parts of his face exposed being his eyes and the bridge of his nose.

Court's heart skipped a beat. Only a man with serious skin afflictions would cover himself so thoroughly. Removing his thumbs from the waistband of his trousers, Court began to move across those precarious stepping stones.

He bowed politely to a woman as he stepped up to the boardwalk, then moved up the stairs toward the office. A small brass bell tinkled above the door as he entered. Momentarily, a short, bespectacled gentleman wearing a dowdy suit exited through a pair of beige draperies.

"You'll have to wait, sir," the man announced. ''I have a patient with me."

"It is your patient I wish to see," Court announced firmly.

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible."

"Why is that?" The doctor, drawing his hands to his hips in exasperation, started to reply, but Court scooted quickly past him and disappeared into the fold of the draperies. Before Dr. Jones could stop him. Court turned the now bare-headed man sitting in a swivel chair toward him. His face was covered with cankerous sores.

"I tried to tell you," the paunch doctor bellowed, "that I might have a case of small pox here."

The man was very young, possibly no more than sixteen. His eyes glistened with moisture as they cut between the doctor and the stranger.

The boy's trembling mouth parted, but before he could reply. Court said, "That isn't small pox, sir. The boy has been burned repeatedly by a cigar."

"How the hell do you know that!" the doctor quipped, attempting to take Court's arm and coax him from the examination chamber. "You have no right to walk into my office and make such a diagnosis."

"It's true," the boy answered, a scarcely audible tremor settling in his throat. "I let some gold dust pass through the pan, and my pa punished me. He tied me to a tree and burned me, until my ma returned from down the stream where she was washin' clothes. It was my ma that sent me here to see the doctor... because the wounds was a-festerin'."

Court's hand fell sympathetically to the thin, young shoulder. "Your pa should be skinned alive for what he did." In departing, he said to the still outraged doctor, "You would have sounded an alarm of small pox and panicked a whole city. Sir, I would like to see some evidence of your medical degree, if, indeed, you possess such evidence—"

"You have no right to make any demands of me!"

Court shrugged absently. "Of course, I don't." He returned his hat to his head and started to leave. "I'll send a police authority up here... perhaps he will have more rights than I do."

Court had just opened the exit door when the doctor quietly said, "Wait... you're right, sir. I do not have a medical degree. But, I have helped many people."

"And how many have you killed?"

Actually, the doctor could think of only one, a young woman whose abscessed tooth he had pulled. Two weeks later she had died of toxic poisoning, though her death was not related to the tooth extraction. Dr. Mallory Jones was the only one who knew of his responsibility, and it would remain that way. "None, sir, but I implore you not to go to the authorities."

Court closed the door and reentered. "Then I would like a little information in exchange for my silence."

"And that is?"

Court removed the well-worn sketch from his pocket. "Have you seen a man who looks like this? Who was badly burned about his legs and torso, with minor burns on his neck and face?"

"I have seen no such man," he replied. "Perhaps another doctor—"

"He would have come to someone like you," Court replied without hesitation. "Someone unscrupulous, without a medical degree, who would ask no questions,

nor care about his past."

"I don't appreciate your insults, sir." The doctor spoke arrogantly and without hesitation, though he knew the insults were warranted. "You are English, are you not?"

Court had, effectively, decided that their reasons for discussion were ended. The man had claimed not to have seen Gye Bedford. Thus, he again approached the door. "Congratulations, sir, on your brilliant command of regional brogues. I hope you are as good at your illegal medical practice—"

He had spoken quietly so that the boy in back could not have heard him. He, after all, would not want the authorities to know of the brutalities rampant in so many of the gold-mining families. Despite their faults. Court had seen these families flooding into California fight all odds to stay together. But Court didn't like it. He didn't like the idea of that young man returning to his father. It made him ache inside. It made him think of Colleen, and the brutalities she had suffered at the hands of Gye Bedford. He had an aching in his heart to see her again, though it only hurt more to see her twisted and bedridden, unaware of anything that went on around her.

Disappointed that the boy had not turned out to be Gye Bedford, Court made haste in returning to his boardinghouse. There, he found a message waiting for him, from Joe Fuller at Wildwood. Joe had kept him apprised of happenings at Wildwood, though their association had been kept a secret from Laureli, and this latest message assured Court that Bedford had not returned to Wildwood. He also assured him that, in his opinion, no one at Wildwood knew his whereabouts. Court found that hard to believe. Laureli had spirited him out of the county, and she, alone, probably knew where he was. He would never forgive her for deceiving him, for seducing him when he might have caught up to Gye Bedford. She was a devious, conniving female, and he was glad that there were no more bonds between them—nothing tangible that would ever force him to have to cross her path again.

He had tried to forget her, tried to hate her.

But the truth was, she was in his heart and his mind twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

The one time that he had tried to enjoy the company of a beautiful lady of the evening had been spoiled by his memories of Laureli Cade. It was her face he had seen, her body he had felt riveted against his own, her mouth seeking the willing searching of his own.

His memories of her were killing him.

Laureli had found it very difficult to remain in bed day in and day out, allowed from her sleeping chamber only to sit in the summer room, or in one of the iron

settees in the garden. She sat there now, surrounded by the late-blooming formosias, the bitter marigolds that were just beginning to flower out, the Spanish daggers with their lethally pointed fronds that discouraged those who might consider scaling the brick wall. She was five months into her pregnancy, and still, with the aid of her full-skirted gowns, only Pietra and, of course. Dr. Delano were aware of it. It was vital that she keep her condition a secret while her brother, expected to arrive any time now, was at Wildwood. Timothy would feel honor bound to his parents to inform them of his sister's pregnancy, which would, in turn, bring her parents home from Europe. Laureli knew that she would be too ashamed to face them.

Court was all she had thought of since he'd ridden out of Wildwood that early January morning. She could still feel the cold drizzle of rain coating her skin, still hear her voice softly calling to him in the pre-dawn hours. If only she could contact him; indeed, if she only knew where he was, she would inform him of Gye Bedford's death—a death she, herself, had confirmed by ordering Poppy and Jan, the only two men who knew of his death, to exhume the body six weeks after its burial. Because of the bitter cold, there had still been enough left of the body to identify it as the man she had known as Wynn Garrett. She had been wretchedly sick after viewing the remains wrapped in the canvas, but she'd had to be sure that Poppy had not lied to her again.

She was enjoying the warm June morning when Jan entered through the garden gate. He had ridden into Brazoria for the weekly mail, which he usually took first to Joe for sorting. But Joe was on the range, and there was correspondence he recognized as being from Europe in the mail. Jan thought Miss Laureli might be anxious to receive the letter that was probably from her parents.

"Thank you, Jan," Laureli said, taking the large stack of mail. As he departed, she began flipping through the various letters, many of which were bills from their ranch supphers, a short note from Dr. Delano advising that he would visit tomorrow... a letter to Joe from San Francisco? Who would be writing to Joe from that far western city? She would have let her curiosity get the best of her if she had not come upon the letter posted in London. She knew her parents were still in Italy, so she cold not imagine who had written her from London. She hastily broke the seal and opened the document that had been folded in thirds. But her scrutiny of the effeminate handwriting halted at the salutation, because it began, Dearest Son...

She again looked at the address on the back of the letter. She then saw that it was addressed to Lord Court McKennon... In the care of Miss Laureli Cade. Lord McKennon? Was that a commonly written salutation in England, used as easily as mister in America? She would have to check into it.

She started to fold the letter—after all, it was not intended for her eyes—but she knew that Court would never receive the message. Perhaps it would provide some small betrayal of his present whereabouts, for surely, if the letter had come from family, he had advised them of his whereabouts. But if he had, why would this letter have come to Wildwood?

Throwing conscience aside, Laureli again unfolded the letter and began to read:

Dearest Son,

It has been many long months since last we heard from you. Your father and I assume that you are still at the place in Texas you identified as Wildwood.

I am so pleased to inform you, dear son, that your sister. Colleen, spoke her first word in January when she repeated her daughter's name. These past three months, she has improved daily, and is now able to sit by herself, to eat her meals without assistance, and to speak, though it is with great difficulty that she does so. I write this letter out of my jubilation. Court, that just this morning she asked for you by name. It is also with sympathy and understanding and great regret that I must inform you that Colleen's serious injuries were accidental, and though you may wish not to believe it, Gye Bedford was not to blame. The young man ran because he was afraid of being held responsible. Colleen has confessed that the incident resulting in Emily's birth was not by force, and that the shame of her indiscretion and the failure of her morals caused her to flee. Gye Bedford tried to catch her, and in doing so, she panicked and fell through the rail of the stairs. Dear son, I implore you, for the sake of your family, and especially Colleen and her daughter, to end your search for Gye Bedford. Please return home where you belong.

Laureli was not aware that tears were in her eyes and clung mercilessly to her cheeks until she saw through the blur how violently her hands were trembling. Poor Wynn—or Gye Bedford—was dead, his last days spent in agony. But Court had spent seven years in agony, searching for a man he thought had assaulted and raped his sister, and who turned out to be no more than a victim himself.

If only she could find Court, if only she could give him this good news and they could resume a relationship that was not handicapped by his obsession. If only he could know that in just four short months they would be the parents of a beautiful baby conceived in their love for each other. But did she really want him to know? She could not bear the thought of his feeling tied to her because of their child. Laureli wanted him to love her; she had even tried to convince herself that he did love her, although he surely, simultaneously, must feel the same degree of hatred. She was very angry with Poppy, Consuelo and Pietra for the conspiracy they had engaged in, for her own good, they had claimed. But all they had accomplished was breaking her heart and parting her from the one man

—the only man--she would ever truly love.

Quietly, she set the letter from Court's parents aside and began absently going through the bills. She hadn't done much toward running the ranch since the end of last year because Pietra watched her like a hawk and had taken it upon herself to turn over all her duties, including the business ledgers, to Joe. This moment gave her the opportunity to see how well Joe was handling the extra responsibilities, since he very seldom reported to her. He had evaded her almost too obviously these past five months, and she was sure he was bothered by whatever Court had said to him before he'd ridden out. She was still a little miffed that Court had found the necessity to cause the rift between her and her ranch foreman.

Although it had not been intended, she opened the letter that had been addressed to Joe and was absently reading it before she realized that it was personal, and certainly not for her eyes. Had she not seen the hastily written signature of the sender—Court McKennon—at the bottom of the short note, she would have immediately refolded it. But her desire to know where Court was became insurmountable, creating a determination that conscience could not scale.

Joe, the letter began, *since I have not heard from you since April, I trust that Bedford has not been seen. My search at this end has been futile, but I will not give up.*

As always, I trust that you will let me know how Laureli is faring.

The note was signed, simply, *Court*.

Laureli was outraged. She felt crimson blazing in her cheeks, and it was certainly not the June sun causing such heat to surface from so deeply within her. All these months Joe had been keeping in touch with Court and had not told her. But could she truly berate Joe for his lack of trust in her? After all, he had not been informed of Wynn Garrett's death. Court had entrusted Joe with the mission of informing him if Wynn showed up at Wildwood.

It had been a startingly revealing morning. First, the letter from England to Court, then Court's letter to Joe, both of which Laureli had read. It was ironic that Joe should have been tied up on the ranges when both letters arrived. Perhaps fate had intervened. Whatever the reason, Laureli was determined that Joe would not be told of either letter. Jan was not able to read or write, so he would not know what had come in the mail.

With that determination firmly implanted in her mind, Laureli rose and reentered the summer room. She sat at a desk amid the healthy potted plants and began to write a letter of her own to Court.

She chose her words very carefully, utilizing Dear Court without hesitation. She

then sealed his mother's letter in with her own and asked Ilona to fetch Jan to her.

Jan answered her summons right away. ‘‘Yes, Miss Laureli?”

‘‘Jan, I want you to take this letter to El Paso—”

“All the way to El Paso, ma'am?” the man questioned, dreading the long trip in the heat of summer.

“I'll pay you well, Jan. And you are not to tell Joe where you are going. In fact, you need answer to no one but me.” Laureli pressed the letter into Jan's hand. “See that it is sent aboard the first Butterfield stage leaving for San Francisco so that it will arrive posthaste.”

“Would you rather I sent a telegram?” Jan queried.

“Telegram?” Laureli's features became animated with the thrill of progress coming to western Texas.

“Yes, ma'am... they can telegraph a message all the way to San Francisco.”

“Y—” The sound had scarcely escaped her words before she quickly said, “No... the stage will be quick enough. And I don't want you saying anything to Joe about it. Should he ask where you've been, simply tell him I sent you on a personal errand.” To send a telegram was too impersonal. She wanted Court to receive her written word—perhaps even to sense the deep feelings she had written between the lines—and the letter that his mother had sent from London. She wanted him to feel the thrill of his sister's recovery, even as she had felt it. She wanted him to know that Wynn Garrett—who, after all, had been innocent—was dead, and that Court's search was ended. What he did after that would be his own choice.

After Jan departed, Laureli sat back in thoughtful silence, so absorbed with her memories of Court that she was spending her first happy moments in months. Just to have seen the words written to Joe in his own hand had been thrilling to her. She was cruelly relieved that Jan was illiterate, that he would not be able to tell Joe that the letter had come from Court. She certainly had no intentions of doing so herself. She took his letter and folded it several times, held it to her heart for a long time, then slipped it beneath a small book in the drawer of her writing desk.

A little later, coaxed from the summer room by the concerned Pietra, Laureli ate a hearty lunch, then sat in the parlor with the very recently married and visiting Ilona, and worked on a needlepoint that had kept her busy this first half of her pregnancy. Ilona still was not aware of Laureli's condition, though she had been a little suspicious of Laureli's refusal to ride her mare, Belleza, on the warm summer evenings as she had been used to doing last year. Laureli scarcely budged from the house, and then only to sit quietly in the garden, reading a

book, or simply daydreaming. Ilona had caught her, several times, though, in sad, thoughtful silence, with tears brimming on her lower lids. Laureli had never offered an explanation, but had merely brightened into a loving smile for her good friend.

But even with Ilona for company this late June afternoon, Laureli could not help thinking of the letters that had arrived simultaneously, and so ironically, this morning, on one of the rare mornings that Joe was away. It was, indeed, as if fate had intervened. She was angry with Joe, who had been keeping in touch with Court without her knowledge, but she couldn't blame him either. As Joe saw it, Laureli had treated him shamelessly. Unbeknownst to Laureli, Joe had gone to Poppy, to tender his resignation as foreman at Wildwood, but Poppy had convinced him to stay on. And since that time, Joe had reported most of the activities and business transactions at Wildwood to Poppy, rather than to Laureli. She hoped that one day Joe might forgive her for what she'd done to Court.

But there remained the secrets. Joe still did not know of Wynn Garrett's death, and so could not have informed Court. They were vicious little secrets keeping Court away from her, and away from Wildwood. But now, that would be quickly mended. The death of the man Court had been trailing would be known to him once he received her letter. She was elated that he would know of the recovery of his adored sister, and that Gye—or Wynn, as Laureli had known him—had not truly been at fault.

Writing the letter to Court that morning had given Laureli hope. She deliberately had not told him of her pregnancy. She prayed that he might return to Wildwood because he loved her, not because he had sired the babe she carried within her. There was nothing in the world she wanted more than Court's love, given freely and without abandon. There was nothing in the world she wanted more than for him to know that she carried his child. She prayed that he would forgive her, and that he would be happy with the news she wanted to give him when again they met.

''Laureli?"

Startled, Laureli flew from her dreamworld and her pale blue eyes met those of the confused Ilona. ''Oh, my, was I daydreaming again?" she asked, a touch of crimson rising in her cheeks.

"I would say so," Ilona laughed. "That look on your face! If I hadn't been sitting right here in the room with you, I'd have sworn you were tumbling in the hay with a handsome young thing!"

"Ilona!" Laureli admonished, instantly sharing the much-needed laughter with her friend. "You do speak of—of unspeakable things! Now... tell me, how are you and Derrick doing?''

Ilona sat back, and a dreamy smile touched her ample mouth. “I love him so much, Laureli. He is good to me. And he treats little Sarah as if she were his own child. I could never have asked for a better husband.”

“I have to agree,” Laureli replied. “I grew up with Derrick, and I have never seen him vicious or violent.”

“Except when Johnny Raines is about,” Ilona countered.

Laureli dropped her needlework, disconcerted by the idea. “He hasn’t been bothering you, has he?”

“He comes by the homestead occasionally. He’s a bit arrogant, and a fool, but Derrick is patient with him.” Ilona shrugged. “I don’t know why Derrick doesn’t tell him to stay away. Perhaps, because he is kin.”

“Sometimes I wonder about that,” Laureli quipped, the image of Johnny Raines in her mind suddenly pinching her features. “If that stinker would take a thousand dollars to get out of Texas, I believe I would give it to him.”

“He’s still angry with you for what you did to him,” Ilona said, more to make conversation than desiring to speak of her husband’s half-brother.

“Ouch! I hardly raised blisters. And he deserved much more!

“But you humiliated him.”

“And he deserved that, too.” Laureli dropped her stitchery into a basket beside her chair and rose. Ilona saw her almost lose her balance and came immediately to her feet. “Clumsy me,” Laureli laughed weakly. “I can hardly get out of a chair anymore.”

As she had lost her balance, Laureli had clutched the folds of her gown to her abdomen. The roundness there had not gone unnoticed by the insightful Ilona. She had suspected for some time now that something was amiss. Ilona approached and, without warning, stretched the fabric of Laureli’s skirts over her abdomen. ‘‘And how long were you going to keep this a secret?” she asked sadly.

Tears glazed Laureli’s powder-blue eyes. Instantly, she hugged Ilona to her. ‘‘Oh, please don’t tell... not yet... I cannot have Timothy knowing about it. He would certainly write to my parents and... and I can’t have them know, not yet, not until—”

Ilona pulled slightly back and held Laureli’s hands. She guided her to the divan where they sat beside each other. “The father? I assume Court is the father?”

Laureli dropped her eyes. It seemed hours, rather than the short expanse of seconds before she replied quietly, “Yes, it is his child.”

“And does he know?” Unable to reply because of the painful lump in her throat, Laureli lightly shook her head. “He must know, Laureli. He has a right to know.”

When Laureli raised her head, Ilona saw the greatest pain reflect in her gaze.

She held her close and rocked her gently. “Oh, Ilona, I want him to know, truly I do. But I don’t want him to return to Wildwood, to me, simply because of the baby. I don’t want to entrap him with my condition. I want him to return because he loves me.”

“Oh, but he does. I knew it. We all knew it. That is why Poppy sent him away. He wants so much better for you. Though I, personally, cannot agree that such a man exists.”

“There can be no man for me but Court.” Laureli closed her eyes and gently wept. She had never realized what a truly good friend she had in Ilona. Perhaps more than anyone in the world, Ilona understood. “I love him so much, Ilona. I want him with me forever. For him, I will give up Wildwood. For him, I would leave Texas and never look back... and never regret it for a moment.”

Gently, Ilona put distance between them and enveloped Laureli’s fingers between her own. “Then we must do something about this. We cannot allow a misunderstanding to keep you two apart. I believe Court loves you—and God knows, you love him. So, what can I do, my good friend, to bring you back together?”

Laureli flicked the tears from her flushed cheeks. She smiled warmly. ‘‘Keep my secret for a little while longer, Ilona. For heaven’s sake, don’t tell Poppy, because he’ll have a posse after the first man he suspects is responsible for—” Her hand fell to her abdomen. “This.”

“We are friends. Your secret is my secret. But, tell me... do you know where Court is?”

“I do now. He has been corresponding all along with Joe, and a letter arrived this morning while Joe was on the range. I opened it, and I have sent a letter back. Jan is even now riding for El Paso, to see that the letter is sent aboard the Butterfield stage. Within a week, Court will receive my letter.”

“And you told him about the baby?”

“No... as I told you, I want him to return because he loves me. If I tell him about the baby, he might feel compelled to return simply because of that. I simply cannot entrap him that way.”

“I see what you mean.” Just then, the rumble of a wagon tore the silence of late afternoon asunder. Ilona stood. “That’ll be Derrick, coming to fetch me.”

Laureli walked out of doors with her. As she watched the two young people so much in love disappear around the bend, she thought of Court. She hoped that they would be together one day. She hoped that he could forgive her for the lies and the deceptions. But was she asking too much of him? He was, after all, a mortal man, with a heart so very capable of being broken.

She knew better than anyone because she was the one who had broken it.

Slowly, Laureli turned toward the house and her bedchamber. Dr. Delano would make his weekly visit tomorrow. She wanted to be able to tell him that she had followed his orders and remained in bed.

As usual, Pietra would bring her a light supper, and then she could drift off to sleep. But tonight would be different. She would not have to cry herself to sleep. She could think of Court, and the letter even now making its way to him.

He would return to Wildwood. She had to force herself to believe that.

Chapter Fifteen

Although Court's feelings for Laureli had wavered between love and hate these past few months, he could not put the blame completely on her shoulders. She had protected a man who had saved her life, had seen him horribly burned and had wanted only to make his suffering easier. That was the only reason she had spirited him away from Wildwood to a place where Court could not find him. Until he had put evidence in front of her that could not be disputed, she had believed that the man she knew as Wynn Garrett had been innocent. But those moments after the presentation of that evidence! That was what Court could not forgive. That she had seduced him, returned his words of love and adoration, feigned satisfaction and fulfillness in his arms, simply to give Garrett a head start, was something he would never forget. She had lain in his arms, loving him, telling him how much he meant to her... even to confess that she wanted him always in her life... and all the while Garrett had been riding hard and fast, to put that much needed distance between them before Court was the wiser.

Still, a passion stirred within him when he thought of Laureli, which was anytime he was sober. When he was drunk, and he'd been enjoying that state much too frequently these days, he thought of nothing but his hatred for Gye Bedford. He didn't care how long his search lasted, or how far the trail took him; he would take him back to England for the punishment he deserved. Court would never let the matter die, not as long as he himself lived.

So, with his hunt snagged by circumstances again. Court decided to spend a few days as a crusader. He applied for and was readily commissioned a deputy marshal in San Francisco. In that capacity, he visited the various gold mining camps, which had dwindled in the years since the great gold rush of '49, and kept tabs on the families who still searched for the elusive pot of gold that would make them wealthy. He had not forgotten the torture on the young man's face in the office of the doctor on Montgomery Street, and he made it his duty to see that such domestic violence was not a way of life among the gold miners. It was a job that gave him strength of character, personal satisfaction, and brought him the respect of the elite citizens of San Francisco.

Sometimes, though, he felt very lost. Whenever he indulged too much in the

bottle, he felt that he was nothing but a drunk pinned to a tin star. He began to draw into himself, hesitating to make friends though his character naturally drew admiration, and spending long days on the outskirts of San Francisco and throughout the peninsula between the Pacific Ocean and the bay. He met his fair share of comely young women, but none matched the fire and vitality and beauty of Laureli Cade'. And certainly, none were as devious. So, why couldn't he forget her? It was a question he asked himself every day, and he still could not come up with a sensible answer. She was in his blood.

Thus, when he received her correspondence some weeks later, he was at first annoyed that Joe had betrayed his trust, and curious about the letter itself, which lay unopened on a small side table for some hours. He rested half naked on the bed, drinking straight from a bottle of cheap whiskey and occasionally cutting his gaze to the letter as though it, alone, owned him body and soul. Finally, when he decided that he had enough whiskey in him to face anything she had to say—even her lies and deceptions—he ripped open the letter. Something fell as it opened. He drunkenly swung his feet to the floor and picked it up, immediately recognizing his mother's handwriting.

The contents of his mother's letter immediately sobered him, and he found his gaze blurred not by whiskey, but by tears. Colleen—dear, sweet Colleen! How could it possibly be that after all these years she was recovering? And could he believe that Gye Bedford had not been responsible? Could it be that he had been chasing an innocent man for seven years, making his life as miserable as he had made his own? If anyone beside his mother had not written these words, he would not believe them. But his mother's word was indisputable.

At first he had felt disbelief, then shock, but now he felt only elation. Even as he wept, he laughed, thinking of Colleen's youthful innocence, her impish face flocked by a mane of hair as dark as his own. He thought of little Emily, who had been only three years old when he'd last seen her. And all he wanted to do now was return home—home to England and family—to Colleen and Emily. He wanted to pick up some semblance of a normal life. Perhaps Scotland Yard would welcome him back into its ranks. Although his father had harbored political aspirations for him, Scotland Yard had always been the future that Court sought. There, he would be able to give to the people, unlike politicians, who were content to take, greedily and obsessively.

Still, Court clutched in his hand the letter from Laureli that he had not yet read. His hand balled into a fist, crumpling the paper between his fingers. He wanted to take the vile thing and throw it to the farthest corner, but curiosity would not release its hold on his mind. She had, after all, forwarded his mother's letter to him—a letter that had taken a terrible burden off his heart. And, he had to admit,

she had been right about Gye Bedford, and he had been wrong. Thus, he could at least have the decency to read the words she had written. Hesitantly, he smoothed out the crumpled letter and his gray-black eyes began to scan the page:

Dear Court,

I know that I am the last person in the world you will wish to hear from right now. And I don't blame you. I have done you a terrible injustice.

Please do not think that Joe has betrayed your confidence. It was ironic that your letter was brought to Wildwood on a day when Joe was away, thus it was brought to me, along with the letter from your mother, which is enclosed with my letter. It was accidental that the letter was opened—

Accidental, indeed! She was a damned snoop! Court read on:

I am so happy for the recovery of your dear sister. And I hope you will be receptive to the news that Wynn Garrett, or the man you know as Gye Bedford, did not escape Wildwood. He died that same night that you and I were together. Please believe me, Court, when I tell you that I did not know he was dead. I had been told that he'd escaped, and that was the news I relayed to you.

I will not apologize for the wonderful moments I spent with you that night. I will not apologize because I loved you then, I love you now, and nothing you can say or do will spurn my love. There is something special I wish to tell you—something that certainly will enrich both our lives—but I will not write it in this letter. If you will find it in your heart to forgive me, I will follow you to the ends of the earth. I know that you hate me right now, but I also know that you love me. I am willing to wait. Court, as long as it takes for you to forgive me.

All my love, Laureli

So! She was still being devious! Enraged by the letter. Court balled the paper and threw it to that corner where he should have thrown it without reading it. How dare she try to get beneath his skin, like a damned, prickly rash! How dare she attempt to undermine his conscience with her declarations of love! God! Court scooted back to the pillow and took up the bottle of whiskey. She was in his heart and his mind. So why shouldn't she invade every square inch of his anatomy? How he hungered for her, wanted to feel the softness of her body against his own, her wine-sweetened mouth tempting and tasting his willing one. As though his body operated separately and apart from his mind, he again swung his booted feet to the floor, approached the corner and retrieved the letter she had written. For the rest of the afternoon, he read it over and over and over, until darkness came and the whiskey became as thick as blood in his veins and forced him into a deep, overwhelming sleep.

The following morning, groggy-headed and suffering an abominable hangover, which he knew, without a doubt, that he deserved. Court forced himself to make

decisions. He felt weak from lack of nutrition the day before, but somehow managed to descend the stairs where the boardinghouse matron had prepared breakfast for her boarders. He forced himself to eat, and drank half a dozen cups of coffee, which had the effect of sobering him.

Then he set his priorities. He first resigned as a deputy marshal, refusing the entreaties that he remain on in their paid employ, purchased a ticket for the stage to El Paso, turned in his rental horse, then returned to his boardinghouse to pack his few belongings. He wasn't sure why he chose to go by way of El Paso and New Orleans, then by ship to New York, rather than overland, but he was sure it had something to do with Laureli Cade. Besides evading the Indian renegades who plagued the stage lines across the great Northwest, he might, in his travels, choose to stop off at Wildwood and visit old friends.

By mid-afternoon he had begun the first leg of his journey to the southeast and in six days' time he was leaving El Paso, where he had posted a quick note to Joe telling him of his plans. He was now on his way to New Orleans and within a few days, he passed within fifteen miles of Wildwood. Closing his eyes, he imagined that even over this distance the sweetness of Laureli's skin, the lilac perfume of her freshly washed hair, wafted into his senses, assailing him with his bittersweet memories of her. A mile further on the road, he stuck his head out of the coach and asked the driver to halt. Slowly, the six-horse team slowed and the driver asked, "What is it you want, mister?"

"How close are we to the ferry across the Brazos?"

"A mile, give or take a foot or two," the driver replied lazily.

"Then I want off here," Court replied, easing his long legs up over the skirts of a plump woman sitting across from him. He exited the coach, then stretched his legs while the driver searched for the small canvas bag and saddlebags he'd thrown atop the luggage compartment in El Paso.

"You paid for a ticket to New Orleans," the driver reminded him.

"So I did."

"Can't refund your fare, mister."

"Didn't ask you to." As suddenly as he had made the decision to leave the coach, Court knew he could not return to Wildwood. He could not face Laureli Cade and allow her to manipulate him as she had before. He could not allow her to wheedle her way back into his heart and hurt him as she had already hurt him. Thus, just as the befuddled, inconvenienced driver was prepared to throw down his personal belongings, Court raised his hand. "Wait, I've changed my mind." He climbed back into the coach, careful to avoid the skirts of the woman traveling with him.

A day later the coach was crossing another ferry at the Sabine River. They

stayed overnight at a stage line twenty miles into Louisiana and resumed their journey the following morning with a fresh team.

All through the day Court read and reread Laureli's note to him. She passionately swore her love, but all he could remember were the lies, drifting intoxicatingly toward him with the aura of her perfume. He had loved her so deeply that he hadn't recognized her vices and her vicious, conniving acts. But he knew them now, and he convinced himself that he recognized them in the words she had written.

He wasn't sure what her ploy was, but he wouldn't fall for her again. Laureli Cade was only a memory for him—a pleasant, beautiful, treacherous and very lethal memory. As soon as he returned to England, he would forget her. He forced himself to believe that was possible.

That summer of '59 was a lifetime for Laureli. Daily, she had to devise reasons why she could not ride with

Timothy, who had arrived just the week before from West Point Mihtary Academy. Timothy had scarcely settled into his old room before Laureli, in her enthusiasm to make his visit pleasant, drew all of their friends and acquaintances together at Wildwood for a banquet dinner and dance, which required the parlor furniture to be rearranged around the walls. The young women of the county stood in a closely knit, blushing line, awaiting their turn to dance in the arms of the dashing young West Point cadet. And, to everyone's relief, Johnny Raines did not disrupt the revelry of the night.

When things again returned to normal, Laureli had to come up with excuses when her brother questioned Dr. Delano's weekly visits, and the reasons why she spent so much time in her bedchamber or in the summer room, engaged in crochet or needlework, rather than riding her mare along the Brazos. Finally, she admitted, somewhat sheepishly and with Dr. Delano's confirmation, that she had not fully gotten over her bout with pneumonia back in the winter, though full recovery was imminent. Dear, sweet, naive Timothy finally decided that his sister was being wise in her decision to recover slowly from such a close call with death. She was almost relieved when August came and Timothy prepared for the return trip to New York, via New Orleans and the military two-decker, Washington.

That early Friday morning, she had felt the immediate loss of Timothy as he'd ridden off with Poppy toward Brazoria to catch the first stage to the East. She was sick at heart, not only because Timothy was gone for another year, but because Court had never seen fit to respond to her letter. Although they were parted by time and distance, he would always be with her—indeed, a very vital part of Court's existence grew within her. In just over two months she would

give birth to his baby, and she so dearly wanted him to know. But first, she had to know that he loved her, and that was a confession that he obviously was not willing to make.

Her mind in a maze of confusion and indecision, she sent Pietra to the bunkhouse with a summons for Joe to join her for coffee in the summer room. It was a stifling hot August morning and she opened some of the panes, allowing a warm, gentle breeze to permeate the large glass chamber.

She was just settling back to the settee, puffing her skirts about her so that Joe would not detect her condition when he walked through the garden gate. She smiled when he entered the room, but did not rise.

"Thank you for coming, Joe," she greeted as pleasantly as possible. She was terribly hurt that he had evaded her for the past seven months, while he had engaged in a conspiracy, of sorts, with Court McKennon. She knew that Joe had defended her one dark night against Court's insults, but Joe had not forgiven Laureli for deceiving Court, and for thwarting his attempts to take Wynn Garrett into custody. Laureli was sure that Joe's own prejudices against the incompetent Wynn had compelled him to join forces with Court. "Would you like coffee?"

"Wouldn't mind if I do. Miss Laureli."

They were the first really pleasant words he had spoken to her in months. She poured coffee, put sugar in her own and handed Joe his cup, black and unsweetened, as he liked it. "Joe, the reason I've asked you here this morning is __"

"If it's about the yearlings, they've been herded up for the trip to San Antonio __"

"It's not about the yearlings." She hesitated to continue. "I am well aware that you have kept in touch with Court McKennon—"

He drew in a ragged breath, certainly surprised at her proclamation. "How do you know that, Miss Laureli?"

Conscience forbade her to mention the letter she had intercepted. "I know you have, Joe. That is all that is important. It is just as important to me that I know where he is now."

Joe sat forward, sipping his coffee somewhat thoughtfully. "I reckon he's still in 'Frisco, lookin' for old Wynn Garrett."

"He knows now that Wynn Garrett is dead."

Joe almost choked on the coffee he had been just about to swallow. "Dead... hell, Miss Laureli... how would you know that?"

In the moments that followed, Laureli went into the gruesome details of Wynn's death. She watched Joe's expression change from shock to disbelief, and then to a sort of passive acceptance. She wished they'd had this talk months ago. "I am

very sorry that no one has seen fit to tell you before now that Wynn had died that night. And I'd rather not say how I knew where to contact Court, Joe, but I assure you, he has been apprised of Wynn's death. And I ask you, please, to inform me of Court's whereabouts."

Rather than reply, Joe said, "If this is true. Miss Laureli, then you didn't know about old Wynn when you told McKennon he'd escaped?"

"I didn't know, Joe. I swear... I didn't know. Poppy thought he was protecting me by sending Court on a wild-goose chase."

"Then I've done you a terrible injustice by siding with McKennon against you."

"That doesn't matter any longer, Joe. What matters is that I be told of Court's whereabouts. I have every reason to believe that you know where he is."

Joe did not hesitate to answer. "All I know, Miss Laureli, is that he got word of his sister's recovery, and he's returned to England."

Laureli felt her heart hit the floor like a lead weight. So, he had gotten his mother's letter, and her own note, written with abandon, swearing her love for him. He had ignored it just as surely as if it had never been written. She had her answer. Court would never forgive her, and she alone had destroyed the love that they might have shared. The only tangible thing she would ever have of their love was the baby she carried within her. She wondered if that was enough. She wondered if she could go on without Court.

''Do you still keep in touch with him, Joe?"

"I don't expect I will," he replied matter-of-factly. "He wanted only to know if Garrett returned to Wild-wood. That's the only reason I kept in touch with him at all. If Garrett showed up here, I was going to let him know. Hell... he had a right, Miss Laureli."

Although she knew, for a fact, that he had, Laureli couldn't help but ask, "Did he ever inquire about me, Joe?"

Joe shrugged carelessly, took a sip of coffee, then a smile briefly touched his mouth. "In every letter I got from him. Miss Laureli, he said that he hoped you were faring well."

Tears brightened Laureli's eyes, but she did not allow them to touch her cheeks. "Do you think he will ever forgive me, Joe?"

Joe put down his cup and gently patted her hand. "I reckon he will, miss, in time. Now..." He arose. "I'd better get on out to the range and check on those yearlings."

As he reached the door, Laureli called out, "Joe." He half turned toward her. "Thank you for being truthful with me. I hope we can be friends."

Joe tipped his hat. But that was not enough respect for the young lady he had watched grow up from a gangly pigtailed girl of thirteen. He closed the distance

between them and warmly took her hands between his own. “I’ve always felt the same fondness for you, Miss Laureli. I might have been mad about the way you treated McKennon, but I promised your ma and pa that I’d look out for you. I couldn’t do that if I didn’t care for you.” Joe gave her a brief, but very warm smile. “Good day, Miss Laureli.”

In the days to follow, Laureli made a very important decision. Being seven months along in her pregnancy, it would be impossible to hide her swelling abdomen beneath the thick folds of her skirt much longer. Because she was so adamant that she leave Wildwood before her secret was discovered, Solon reluctantly made arrangements for Laureli to sail aboard an American schooner from Galveston Bay to New Orleans, where she would stay with an old family friend, Justin Joubert, until her child was delivered. She could not take any chances on a member of her family, or someone else along the river, somehow managing to contact her parents about the expected arrival of her child.

She had not seen Justin Joubert, now sixty-eight years of age, for more than two years. The infirmities associated with aging had prevented him from making his yearly trips to the Wildwood ball, always held the last Friday in November, a thirty-year tradition that had temporarily halted when Laureli’s parents had left for England.

Solon himself rented the finest shock-resistant carriage available in the region and drove Laureli to New Washington on the western tip of Galveston Bay. It was an easy trip and one which Laureli tolerated well, despite the August heat. She boarded ship on a cool Wednesday morning and stood at the rail until Solon’s short, stocky frame became a mere dot on the pier. The trip to New Orleans would take just under three days, so Laureli retired to her cabin and did not leave until the announcement was made that the port of New Orleans was only an hour away.

Very soon after docking, the weeping Laureli found herself folded in the comforting embrace of Justin Joubert. He asked no questions, nor did he lecture her on her morality. That was the one thing she admired most in Justin. When he loved you, he loved you no matter what.

In the bright, sunny days of late summer, Laureli enjoyed the large, luxurious chamber in Justin’s townhouse overlooking the French market. She listened to the haunting cries of the Negroes carrying their goods to market, the street vendors hawking their wares, the almost rhythmic clip of shod carriage horses on the brick roadways. She could lie in her bedchamber at night and feel her own heartbeats, and each tiny echo from deep within her carried Court’s name upon it. Strangely, she did not long for the quietude of Wildwood. She enjoyed the oftimes raucous nights in the streets below, and the long moments of solitude

that nurtured her memories of the only man she could ever love.

And she felt wonderful. Thus, she was very surprised when Justin insisted on bringing in a full-time nurse to take care of her, a very kind lady who lived not very far away on Rue du Maine.

She found a world of understanding and sympathy in the nurse. Miss Perdita, who herself had never been married but had given birth to a stillborn child many, many years ago. They sat for hours in the front gallery where comfortable rattan settees had been set about amid the weeping willow, and gardenias and azaleas in large black-iron pots. The azaleas were no longer in bloom, but the gardenias had begun to unfold their massive buds just the day before, and scatterings of fragrant white blossoms wafted through the gallery. Each evening

Laureli picked one gardenia, which she nestled among the dark green fronds picked from an azalea, and took the bud vase to her room. It was rather sad, though, when she awoke the following morning, to find that the delicate edges of the gardenia had already begun to turn brown, though its life in the cool bedchamber was longer than its fate in the stifling heat out of doors. Those exposed to the direct sun bloomed only to wither and die within hours. In a way, Laureli felt that her life was like the gardenia blossom. She arose each morning, forcing herself to feel fresh and free and alive, but by evening and nightfall, with the day's thoughts plagued by her bittersweet memories of Court, she was a mental shambles, withering just as surely as if she were, indeed, a delicate gardenia.

In early September, Laureli received a letter from her parents—a letter that had first been sent to Wildwood, then forwarded on to her by dear Pietra. She recognized her mother's flowing handwriting, held the letter to her heart for a long, silent moment, then slowly broke the seal.

My darling Laureli, the letter began. *Although your father and I are having such a marvelous time in Europe, I cannot stress how very much I miss you and Timothy. We have made new friends in Italy and have returned to England with them as guests at their home, Chatsworth, in Derbyshire. We have decided to spend the long, cold winter here, and to make new friends throughout the province. These past two years of traveling have been very enlightening and enjoyable for your father and me, and I pray that you understand our need to be together, and alone, in this, the midyears of our lives.*

The very day we were to leave Florence I received a long letter from Timothy. He was just leaving West Point to return home to Wildwood. I hope you and your brother had a grand reunion. I remember the competition between the two of you, and how very furious he would get when you would beat him in a horse race. I do hope you have since learned to be charitable and allow the darling

boy to win a race or two every now and then.

Laureli smiled, but it was a very sad smile. Since Timothy had been confused by her refusal to ride during his visit, he had spent most of his time with Poppy, Jessie, and the other men. Laureli had enjoyed sweet moments with her brother, but not as many as she might have wished. Flicking a tear from the corner of her right eye, Laureli continued to read her mother's letter.

In October there shall be a magnificent ball at Chatsworth that will be attended by most of the royal family, including Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. I am very much looking forward to it. Can you imagine two Texans greeting the royalty of England? In the meanwhile, Matthew and I have resumed our search for my family, whose members are scattered throughout England. I have written a special letter to your Poppy. As I told him, we were very surprised to find a great aunt and uncle still living in Northampton, your Poppy's mother's sister and brother. Oh, dear, I do hope that I am not confusing you with all of this! Both are in their nineties, but as spry as today's breeze. It was such a joy to spend a day with them last week.

Mariah Cade ended her letter *With all Mother and Dad's love.*

Oh, they were in England! Dear, sweet England!

Wherever they were, they could not be more than three days' distance from her beloved Court. Quietly, Laureli refolded the letter and held it to her, as if its coolness alone could bring her closer to Court. The letter had been written in England. On its journey to her, it might have crossed paths with her beloved. Oh, Court... Court... where are you? Why didn't you return to me?

With Miss Perdita in the kitchen off the rear gallery supervising the preparations of Laureli's evening meal, the heartbroken young woman dropped her forehead to her palm and wept very, very gently. All the world's hurt collected inside her, crushing her, smothering her, coursing a river of emotions through her that could be relieved only through the salty tears that riveted down her crimson cheeks.

In the days to follow, Laureli forced some semblance of acceptance upon her soul. Things were as they were, and nothing she could do would change that. She was an unwed woman about to give birth to a baby—a baby born of love that Laureli was sure could not be matched by any other emotion in the universe. She had lost Court. She would now have to live her life only for the precious child growing within her.

Laureli was relieved that when her time drew near, Solon would journey to New Orleans to deliver her child. Although she had assured him that Justin would take good care of her, Solon had insisted, and Laureli was relieved to know that he would be with her at that most precious moment in her life.

Unfortunately, though, unborn babies kept their own schedules and were not always willing to wait until the proper time to enter the world. Two weeks before her expected delivery, Laureli went into labor. Miss Perdita went for a competent midwife and at two o'clock the following morning, a very exhausted Laureli held a healthy baby boy in the crook of her arms.

"Please," she murmured, cutting her gaze between the beaming nurse and the indifferent midwife, ''may I be alone with my son for a little while?"

When the chamber door quietly closed, Laureli touched her lips to the tiny forehead and wept gently. ''I promise, my little darling," she whispered, "that I will be a good mother to you. And one day..." She paused, closing her eyes so that she could form a perfect image of the man who had fathered that tiny new life. "When you are older, I will tell you all about your papa."

After the long, exhaustive labor, Laureli fell asleep. She did not hear the door open, the nurse enter, or feel her new baby son lifted from her arms. Her dreams were filled with Court and the tiny son who was a mirror reflection of his father, and she wept in her sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, October, 1859

Court wasn't sure why he'd agreed to travel to Chatsworth to the annual ball that drew royalty from throughout England and Scotland. He walked out of doors, viewing the brick-built orangery, Flora's Temple, the Seahorse Fountain, and other lovely sights built in the seventeenth century by the sixth duke of Devonshire and Joseph Paxton. The weather was cool, yet not unpleasant, and he wished he could go into the greenhouse and sit quietly by himself for a while.

As it was, he was required by duty to escort his sixth cousin half-a-dozen times removed around the gardens of Chatsworth. She was quite a pleasant lady, just under five feet tall and not very attractive, yet she could be a dynamic, domineering woman when the need arose. She was both physically and temperamentally strong, and frequently utilized both attributes. Her dominating sense of duty, tinged with obstinacy, became a powerful factor in social and political life. She had taken the burden of England upon her shoulders, now covered by the thick ruffles of a somber gray satin gown. Her name was Victoria, and she had been queen of England for the past twenty-two years.

To hear her speak so freely. Court could not imagine that the short, dark-haired queen had been brought up by her mother in stifling seclusion. Fate had made her the ruling monarch when her two royal uncles, George IV and William IV, had died without heirs. Victoria was responsible and pertinacious, and Court admired her more than any of his other royal kin. Not just because she was queen, but because she was vibrant and alive, a joy to be with and, of course,

because she had chosen him as her favorite male kin.

"So, my dear queen," Court said lightly. ''How is Her Royal Highness enjoying the gardens of Chatsworth?"

"They grow lovelier each year," she replied. "But Albert complains. He does not enjoy the journey from London this time of year. He is a summer person."

"He seemed in good humor this morning," Court replied.

"That is because," Victoria laughed, "I threatened to have him beheaded if he didn't cheer up. After all, if Henry could do away with his spouses by relieving them of a very vital body part, then so can I."

Court joined in her laughter. He knew how very much Victoria and Albert were in love, and he knew that the queen was concerned over Albert's failing health. He had not looked well this morning. His skin had been pallid, and he had not engaged in the outdoor sports of the other men in attendance at Chatsworth. He had chosen, rather, to play chess with the ladies in the large front parlor, and to let them, in turn, win every game. Albert had remarked the day before that there was no sight more charming than a prettily blushing female.

"Shall we go to the greenhouse and see if the Amazonian lily is in bloom?" Court asked, attempting to divert the queen's thoughts from her husband's health.

"It will be my pleasure, cousin," she replied. Soon, they were moving through the azalea dell and following the stream up the steep hillside. "You know, cousin,"

Victoria continued, "Lady Marietta will be in attendance at the ball tonight."

Court frowned as he thought of the rose-frocked Marietta Banion who had clung to his arm this morning, her pert, dimpled chin lifting impishly as she bantered insults back and forth with him. She had been totally unaware that his insults were sincere, and thought that he had been flirting with her. ''Will she indeed?" he asked after a moment.

"Lady Marietta is very beautiful, don't you think? And very intelligent. She will make you a good wife."

"So... my queen has heard that my family is trying to get me married off? If it is any consolation, and if my queen will take my word at face value, I am quite normal when it comes to my attractions to my delicate feminine counterpart."

Victoria laughed. "Lord McKennon has every right to expect a male issue of his only son's loins—"

"My queen!" Court blushed furiously. "You do shock me

"Nonsense!" she replied, brushing back a lock of her auburn hair. "And your queen certainly expects that the most handsome species of the royal family—no matter how distant you are—shall continue the noble line of the McKennons. If

it must come to a royal order, then... I order that you take a wife in the not too distant future!”

Although she had spoken sharply, Court had recognized the underlying affection. “Lady Marietta is very beautiful,” he agreed, “but I don’t fancy living the rest of my life with her. She chatters like a magpie.”

“You are being much too hard on Marietta. Try to be patient, and a little tolerant. Now... tell your queen how Colleen is doing?”

Court felt tears moisten his eyes. He remembered with a raw, choking emotion that had settled in his throat when he had first seen her upon his return. Her pale, slim body had no longer been twisted; rather, she had been sitting regally in a chair with wheels, her dark hair growing thick and luxurious like he remembered, her eyes alive again, not dead and blank. He remembered holding her, weeping against her shoulder, and hearing her speak his name for the first time in eight years. He would never forget that tender reunion. It was the most precious moment in his life. “She grows stronger every minute,” Court replied, aware of the silence that had suddenly fallen between them, and her questioning gaze. “My queen cannot know how jubilant I felt to see her recovering.”

“And the young man responsible for her injuries?” the queen queried.

“He is dead. And I understand from my talks with Colleen—” He deliberately did not mention Laureli’s letter, the source of his knowledge concerning Gye Bedford’s death. He found thinking of Laureli much too painful, though he was not sure if it was love or hate making his memories so tormenting. “That it was all a brutal misunderstanding. I lost eight years of my life. I must now go on living.”

“And get married!” the queen reiterated.

“Perhaps... one day,” Court agreed.

Because, disappointingly, the Amazonian lily was not in bloom, they were soon moving toward the magnificent house nestled in the once wild valley in the Peak district. The yellow stone house embellished by restrained carving boasted one hundred and seventy-five rooms, more than enough space for the guests who had been arriving for the past three days.

With the queen returned to the large chambers reserved year-round for her and Prince Albert, Court borrowed one of the fine horses from the Chatsworth stables and rode toward the Bunkers Hill Wood. He alit his horse beneath an ancient oak whose lower branches hung low to the ground and reclined there, like an absentminded boy trying to get away from the world. These past three months since he had returned to England had produced an array of emotions. His father had obligated him to various social functions for the purpose of finding him a suitable mate, and now Lady Marietta had been named the most likely

candidate. The tall, willowy blonde was among the most beautiful women in England, but Court saw beyond the facade of beauty. He saw a spoiled woman who could pout successfully to obtain her goals, or be as domineering as a mating bull. He could not see any woman without thinking of Laureli Cade, so many, many miles away—in a land that he could love every bit as much as he loved England.

He had been trying for months to forget her, but the more he tried, the more vividly he remembered her winter-cooled skin warming beneath his touch, the willingness of her mouth against his own, the beauty of her feminine form glowing against the fire of a primitive stone hearth in a small, ramshackle line cabin. Every day that passed made his need for her greater, his desire to hold her in his arms more painful. She dominated his soul, wooed his heart with his memories of her, and warmed his body with its desire for her.

Lying lazily along the smooth oak branch, Court was suddenly brought alert by the approach of a fast-moving horse that spooked his own horse so that he had to lurch forward to recapture the reins before he found himself afoot. He looked up to see the satin skirts of a woman riding sidesaddle, her delicate features hidden in the shadows of a large-brimmed hat, its wide chiffon bow tied beneath her chin. Marietta Banion—he groaned inwardly, even as he came to his feet as a proper gentleman should to greet her.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked, a trifle annoyed that his solitude had been disrupted.

Marietta steadied the powerfully muscled mare and outstretched her arms to Court. "Aren't you going to assist me down, you naughty boy?" Court drew in a deep breath to calm his irritation. He assisted her down from the saddle. She flitted past him, then danced toward the tree where he had been reclining. "I saw you leave the stables and I followed you. I was just about to ride with Lord Aimes, but I pleaded a headache—" Marietta dramatically drew her slim, gloved hand to her pale forehead. "I waited until he left, then rode after you. Are you angry with me?" She gave him a coy, mischievous look from beneath pale lashes, certain that he adored her and was glad of her company. She was sure that the very handsome Court McKennon would welcome her boldness, which she found to be more of an attractive attribute than a coy shyness employed by many females.

Although Marietta Banion was beautiful in her satin riding habit that so beautifully matched her violet eyes, something wild and wonderful and unexplainable, born of another day and another time, clicked inside Court's mind—something that had torn him asunder for months. He smiled as he gazed at her. Marietta thought it was for her and returned the smile. Then he firmly took her

arms and Marietta, sure that he wanted to kiss her, lifted her willing mouth to his. But Court merely chuckled as he let her go, and Marietta released an impudent “oof!”

Court drew his hands to his temples and clutched at his black hair. “God, Marietta... you don’t know what you’ve done!”

“Then tell me,” she said in her sweetest voice.

He turned swiftly back and again took her arms, though with more tenderness this time. “I’ll tell everyone tonight—at the ball! I have made a very important decision concerning my future.”

Marietta’s pale ivory features beamed, so sure she was that he would make an announcement of their engagement. “Shall I inform the queen that you have an announcement?”

Court hugged her to him, only because she was the only feminine thing at hand. He was unable to prevent his low chuckle as he replied, ‘‘Yes, by George! Tell our queen that her bachelor kin has a very important announcement to make, and that she can choose the moment.”

Together, they rode back to Chatsworth House, Court returning to the suite of rooms he shared with his family, and Marietta to the chamber she shared with her widowed mother. “Mother, Lord McKennon is going to announce our engagement today!” she shouted, and before her mother could respond, she rushed across the wide corridor covered by its thick, rich blue and rose carpets to the suite her new American friends occupied. The very beautiful, auburn-haired Mariah Cade answered her knock and scarcely had time to move before the younger woman came rushing into the sitting room. “I am going to be married. The announcement will be made this evening.” Mariah Cade lightly squeezed Marietta’s fingers and smiled, despite the frown that sat in her heart. Why would any man want to marry this self-serving, insensitive and flirtatious girl who had not one sincere bone in her body?

Marietta flitted away with her news, and the sound of the door being closed drew Matthew Cade from the desk where he’d been writing a letter to their daughter. “What was that all about?” he asked. Matthew, like his wife, had aged gracefully, his golden hair lightly touched by wisps of gray over his ears, his complexion smooth, except for the tiny lines at the corners of his eyes. “Was that the bubbling, annoyingly beautiful Lady Marietta?” he asked with mild sarcasm.

“It was,” Mariah replied. “She says the announcement of her engagement will be made tonight at the ball.”

Matthew chuckled. “God... what sensible man would want to marry such a tyrant?” And they both shared a laugh together.

Unfortunately, though, by the time the announcement was to be made, Matthew

and Mariah, pleading the exhaustion of several days' activity, retired early to their suite. Court's name had graced many dance cards and he had spent the evening on the ballroom floor, folding a different lady into his arms as each dance began. At ten o'clock. Queen Victoria herself halted the orchestra and moved gracefully to the podium. She looked toward Court and extended her hand, inviting him to her side. Marietta had managed to ease to Court's side when she had seen the movements of the queen.

"Shall I accompany you?" she asked, giggling, holding a delicate lace fan before her face as her eyes cut between many male admirers gathering around her.

"Whatever for?" Court asked in all seriousness. He was sincerely unaware that Lady Marietta had misunderstood his declaration of the early afternoon. Court was not the kind of man to deliberately embarrass a woman, even one as spoiled and selfish as Marietta Banion. "I think I can manage this announcement without your assistance."

"But—" She did not have time to launch her protest. Court had moved quickly through the crowd, all of whom knew him by sight and name, and now stood at the side of his beloved queen. He had long been envied for his close association to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

He started to speak, but saw that his father was pushing Colleen's wheelchair nearer to the front of the crowd. He watched her with pride, her crimson cheeks aglow beneath the magnificent chandeliers, her dark, lustrous hair pulled up and held by a diamond tiara. He had confided in her just an hour ago, so she knew what to expect. His parents, however, did not. He had not wanted their argument to spoil this most special moment in his life.

''Ladies and gentle... my friends," Court began. "It is with great pleasure that I announce my forthcoming marriage to—" He did not notice the crimson-cheeked, smiling Marietta Banion easing slowly toward the podium, her face piqued with excitement. "To an American woman I met some months back... Miss Laureli Cade of Texas."

Marietta promptly fainted, and the crowd began to clap and cheer, both for Court's announcement and for the fact that Lady Marietta, who had boasted throughout the day of her forthcoming engagement to Court McKennon, England's most eligible bachelor, had been outdone at last. Court briefly touched his lips to the cheek of his queen, then moved into the crowd of well-wishers and friends who gathered around. Of course, the lord and lady of Chatsworth were quite surprised at the coincidence. Their new American friends, whom they had met in Florence, and Court's fiancée, were both named Cade. It must, like Johnson or Smith, be a very common name in America. But it was a coincidence

quickly forgotten in view of the fact that the unconscious and prostrate Marietta —the remonstrative shrew of high society—was being unceremoniously carried back to her suite with her wailing mother in tow.

With the readily given blessing of his sister. Colleen, and the very reluctant acceptance of his parents. Court began his journey back to London the following morning, and then to Southampton, where he would take the first ship out for New York. He could hardly wait to see Laureli again, and to draw her into his arms to proclaim a love that was too great to be destroyed by his own stubbornness. Everything about her had spoken so eloquently of love. She had done what she thought was right, and now he had to do what he knew was right. But it was more than a matter of right and wrong. The memories of her drew him like the song of a siren.

To deprive him of the woman he loved went against every grain of his being.

He could hardly bear the thought of the many miles that separated them and wanted only to close the distance, to travel up the Brazos River and see her sitting in the coolness of the morning room where they had last made love that night so long, long ago.

Laureli had been home only two weeks when Christmas rolled around again. Her spirits were still very low after the long, vicious confrontation she'd had with her grandfather soon after her arrival, and words had not been spoken between them since she'd returned to Wildwood with her baby son. Poppy had been furious that she hadn't confided in him. He would have understood and he was very hurt that she had excluded him from this very special moment in her life.

Thus, the Christmas festivities were held at Little Wildwood this year, and Laureli chose to stay at home with her son, whom she'd named Daniel, and Pietra, who claimed that she had never really enjoyed the festivities anyway. Laureli was sure though that Pietra simply did not want to leave her young mistress alone on Christmas Day.

Thus, without Jessie and Consuelo's large family, it was a very lonely Christmas, though Laureli sent many gifts for her family. She sat quietly in the parlor and stared at the Christmas tree, with its garlands of cranberries and popcorn, its little paper decorations made by Consuelo's grandchildren last Christmas, and a few porcelain ornaments her parents had collected over the years. She tried to be cheerful, but she could not. She wanted to put her pride back in the farthest recesses of her mind and ride over to Little Wildwood, but she could not force herself to do that either. She could not spoil Poppy's Christmas by showing up with her illegitimate son. What she did not know was that Poppy was weeping inside, her absence, and the absence of his great-

grandson creating an emptiness that had sent him out of doors and away from the family.

Thus, continuing in the misunderstanding, Laureli entrusted her sleeping child to Pietra's care for a few hours and had Manuel saddle her mare. The air was brisk. A heady wind blew down from the north, and Belleza, who had been confined to the corral for months now, drew at the bit in her eagerness to feel the wind in her nostrils.

Laureli rode fast along the river, taking the wider trails, feeling the crispness of the air like icicles upon her flushed features. It was wonderful being away from the stifling heat of the house. She spent the morning visiting her favorite places: the bend in the river where Poppy used to bring her to fish; the damp, cushioned dales in the forest where she breathed in the pleasant mustiness of the fallen leaves; the line cabin where she and Court had spent a long, fulfilling day of lovemaking and joy. She had just dismounted from her horse and was climbing the hill when she saw the lone figure of a man with his back turned to her. As she quietly approached, she saw that the man standing there was Jessie. He looked quite forlorn, his hands resting lightly on the handle of a shovel, and his hat held precariously between the thumb and index finger of his right hand. He turned, visibly startled, when Laureli stood just out of touching distance of him and spoke.

"Uncle Jessie, what are you doing?"

Jessie cut a very brief glance toward Sam's grave, his mind revolving at an incredible speed to come up with an answer. He could not tell her about his yearly Christmas ritual. He had promised Sam. "Laureli, what are you doing out?"

"Just riding," she replied. "It is such a lovely day. I asked you what you were doing."

Jessie quickly composed a lie that brought a rush of red to his face. "A pup belonging to one of the grandchildren died. I brought it up here and buried it. The boy will feel better thinking it just mosied off. You know young'uns—" He managed a very small smile, sure that she was aware of his little white lie. "Uncertainty is easier to accept than death."

"But so far away from your house, Jessie. Why not to the edge of the woods?"

Jessie merely shrugged, then eased the shovel across his shoulder. "Reckon I'm just sentimental," he replied, taking Laureli's arms as he began to move toward his horse beside the cabin. "I always liked it here. Thought it would be a good place to bury a wayward pup. Now—" Jessie took the reins and held them absently between his fingers. "Are you going to forgive Poppy and come over to Little Wildwood for the Christmas festivities?"

Stubbornness was the one vice that clung to Laureli like vines grabbing at a brick wall. “Poppy has a right to feel as he does,” she replied quietly. “I believe I’ll spend the afternoon with Daniel and Pietra. She’s preparing a nice, cozy dinner for the men at the bunkhouse. We’ll have a good day. Tell Poppy—” Laureli could not complete her statement. She could not ask Jessie to take her spoken sentiment to her grandfather. It was not appropriate. “Tell Poppy that I hope he will forgive me for disgracing the family.”

“Forgive you for what disgrace, Laureli?”

“For my Daniel.”

Her words provoked the usually gentle Jessie into immediate action. He dropped the reins so suddenly that his spooked horse drew its head back. He took Laureli’s shoulders and held them firmly. ‘‘You don’t ever ask forgiveness for giving life, Laureli. If that little boy is on this earth, it is because God willed it. And if you think Poppy resents that precious life simply because you are not married, then you’re not as sensitive to the tremendous love of your family as I thought you were!” The shocked Laureli felt her bottom lip begin to tremble. She raised her wrists limply, but did not try to wriggle from her Uncle Jessie’s grip. “Do you understand me, Laureli?”

“Y—yes. Uncle Jessie. I didn’t realize what I was saying,” she managed after a moment, compelled by the glare in his eyes to drop her own from his gaze. ‘‘I know that my family loves me.”

“And don’t you ever forget it. We will stand by you—support you—no matter what.”

Tearfully, Laureli eased into his gentle embrace. “Oh, I know you will. I could not ask for a more loving family. I am a very, very fortunate lady.”

“Now,” Jessie said, moving closer to her, “shall we return to Wildwood so that I can see that beautiful baby boy. What is he... two months now?”

“Two months and three weeks,” she replied with a proud smile. “He is my beautiful baby boy with a sunny disposition... and a nasty wail when he’s hungry, which is all the time.” Only now, thinking of her dear baby, was Laureli able to laugh.

“And what about you?” Jessie questioned, assisting her onto her horse, then mounting his own. “How have you been these days?”

“I believe I’m beginning to accept the way things are. Uncle Jessie,” she replied truthfully, trying not to think of Court and the emptiness in her heart. “I believe it’s time that I began thinking of a husband. I want to write to my parents about Daniel, but I would like to tell them I am married, also. I don’t think they will castigate me for the order of things,” she continued, thinking, logically, that marriage should come before babies.

Upon arriving home, Laureli entered the parlor to find a clean and fashionably dressed Johnny Raines waiting there, holding a box of chocolates, a new Bible, and several wrapped gifts clutched in his hands. He quickly set the items on the divan and rose when Laureli entered. She, of course, did not know what to expect and was certainly curious, and wary.

"What are you doing here, Johnny Raines?" She could not help but assess his appearance, his stature tall and erect, his eyes clear, not bloodshot from drink, his gray suit new and his shirt crisp and white. His hair was clean and freshly cut and he was even wearing new black boots.

"Miss Laureli..." His greeting was very cordial. "It is Christmas Day and I wish to make amends for the past wrongs I have done you." Nervously, he began picking up the items he had brought. "The chocolates are for you. The Bible—see, I've had your little Daniel's name engraved in the lower right corner, and the gifts are for you, your servant, and the child."

Hesitantly, Laureli took the items, skeptical as to motive of this man who had been a drunkard and a troublemaker for as long as she could remember. "I don't recall that we saw each other on cordial terms the last time, Johnny Raines," she reminded him. "Why are you doing this?"

He shrugged almost boyishly. "Because, Miss Laureli, it is Christmas and I've done wrong in the past, and what you did you had a right to do. Frankly—" He smiled a half-cocked smile. "I was too drunk to feel those blisters raise the next morning. I have to admit you were easy on me that night. Please, Miss Laureli —" His hand went out to touch her, but she evaded him by drawing back very discreetly. "I haven't touched a drop of whiskey in four months. I'm tired of people thinking I'm wild and like my pa. Miss Laureli, I've got a job at the lumber yard in Brazoria. I haven't missed a day of work since I quit drinking."

Laureli motioned to the divan, put the gifts on the table, and sat across from him. ''Why are you telling me all this, Johnny?"

"That's another thing, miss. I don't want to be called Johnny any more. I'm not a wild kid. I'm a man. I want to be called John."

She could almost detect a note of sincerity in his voice. But could she trust him? Could she forget all the episodes when he had caused trouble, disrupting the barn dances, taking out his vengeance on the Mexicans or other minority groups with his horsewhip? Could she forget his cruelty? Perhaps not of the Johnny Raines she knew, but the man sitting across from her scarcely resembled that loathsome creature she remembered. He wanted to be called John. That was one thing she felt she could oblige.

''Very well, John. But I asked you why you're confiding in me; why you are so willing to forgive my own attack on you, and why you are calling on me today."

“Because, Miss Laureli—”

“Please!” She had not meant for her voice to be sharp and quickly amended her tone. “Please, John, don’t keep calling me miss. Laureli will do just nicely. After all, we aren’t that far apart in age and we have known each other for years.”

“All right, Laureli,” His almost black gaze met her pale one. “I would like your permission to come calling on you, Laureli. I believe that one day you will see that I could be a good husband to you, and a good father to your little one.”

Laureli sucked in a sudden, rasping breath. She was too surprised at first to respond, but sat staring at him as if one or the other of them had lost all reasoning. But she could see by his steady, and very handsome gaze, that he was serious.

“My goodness, John, you do surprise me. I believe that marriage is not an appropriate subject to be discussed between us at this time...” Nor ever! Laureli thought, immediately continuing to speak in a quiet tone. ‘‘But I am willing to call a truce, even to be friends. Will that suffice for the time being?”

Johnny stood and took her hand ever so gently. “Yes, Laureli. It will suffice just fine. And you check along the river. You ask folks about me. You can even check with my employer, Mr. Bobbs, in Brazoria County. He’ll tell you that I’m a good, dependable worker.” She did not respond but quietly accompanied him to the foyer. When she reached the door, her hand touched the handle and Johnny’s hand briefly touched hers. Her skin prickled at his caress and she fought the urge to withdraw her hand. She would not have found the appropriate moment to do so if her Uncle Jessie had not approached them.

‘‘Johnny, what are you doing here?” Jessie’s voice was stern. “You’re not trying to cause trouble, are you?

“It’s all right. Uncle Jessie. Johnny—John brought some gifts over for Pietra, the baby, and me. We’ve had quite a pleasant visit.”

Jessie’s narrowed gaze was filled with distrust and skepticism. Even when John offered his hand, Jessie was hesitant to take it. But Jessie could not be that obviously rude and briefly clasped the younger man’s hand. Not wanting to leave Laureli alone with Johnny Raines, he maneuvered him outside. As Johnny walked beside Jessie toward their waiting horses he turned and tipped his hat to Laureli. “Good day. Would you mind if I come calling next weekend?”

Behind him, Jessie was shaking his head, but Laureli replied, forcing light humor into her voice. ‘‘Only if there’s another man around to protect me from you, John Raines.”

He laughed, mounted his horse and moved swiftly into the woods toward his cabin on the Brazos.

Jessie leaned over the pommel of his saddle and shook his finger at Laureli.

‘‘Don’t you trust that snake, Laureli.”

“Don’t worry,” she replied, smiling. “I have my guard up.”

Johnny had scarcely entered the trail out of hearing range of Wildwood before he released a loud, maniacal laughter that reverberated through the winter-barren trees. “If it’s the last thing I do. Miss Laureli, I’ll get even with you,” he murmured to himself, the laughter instantly replaced by a gritting, loathsome slur between his teeth. “When you’re my wife... and that kid is mine...I’ll make both your lives miserable!”

He laughed again, then spurred his bone-thin gelding into a lope along the Brazos River.

Chapter Seventeen

Two months following Christmas Laureli was still amazed at the transition John Raines had made from a greasy mudslinger to the perfect gentleman who frequently sat in her company or rode horseback with her along the familiar trails of Wildwood. He was never brash and forward and had not even tried to kiss her. Although she had grown to enjoy his company, the very idea of his mouth assaulting her own made her feel queasy. Even the men of the ranch were surprised at the change in Johnny, although each was a little dubious of the strange metamorphosis. Joe and Poppy were constantly finding the opportunity to be wary of Johnny, but Laureli could not help but admire the great effort he was making to amend his ways. She even grew to like him in a way, but she knew she could never love him. Yet, he seemed so patient and willing to wait for her decision on his proposal of marriage, which he charmingly, sincerely reiterated at each visit. The very idea of Laureli considering marriage to John Raines had outraged Poppy, and she found herself in frequent spats with her grandfather.

Constantly, grief and emotion and longing tugged at the strings of Laureli’s heart. She could not forget Court, though she knew she would never see him again. She could not write her parents about the birth of her son because she couldn’t face their reaction to her being an unwed mother. Her family had honored her wish not to inform her parents of Daniel’s birth, but she was not sure how much longer she could hold back the announcement of that precious little soul. Despite the lack of a husband, she was proud of Daniel, and proud to be his mother. Thus, it was with great trepidation and soul-searching that, one cool February afternoon after their evening; ride along the Brazos, Laureli agreed to become John Raines’s wife.

While she wept in her bedchamber for three days straight after her reluctant agreement, her family was in an uproar. She was of age; no one could stop her from making that fatal mistake.

They tried reasoning with her, but Laureli had other reasons. She knew that Court was lost to her and Daniel needed a father. Daniel's happiness counted now. It did not matter that she would be trapped in a loveless marriage. She truly had grown to believe that John would be good to her. But could she lie in his arms and pretend wondrous fantasies of lovemaking, yet see in her mind only Court's face and feel his body against her own?

So that she would have no chance to change her mind, Laureli set the wedding for the first Friday evening in March, which was just over a week away. Pietra was no help in making the preparations. Every time she met Laureli's gaze, she burst into uncontrollable sobs. Thus, Laureli turned to the lackadaisical Consuelo. After all, she had once been married to John's father, Clyber, and perhaps she would understand Laureli's need to marry. So, while John Raines set his plan of lifelong vengeance against Laureli Cade into action, she absentmindedly prepared for the wedding that was little more than a choking lump of resistance in her throat. While Consuelo fussed over ribbons and bows for the pale-blue dress she would wear for her wedding, Laureli could think only of somber, funereal black. That was the way she felt right now. She felt that she was dying, suffocated by convention. Had she been too rash in her decision to marry John Raines? Could she truly believe that he had changed so much that he would be a good husband and father, and a responsible citizen of the Brazos?

She had, indeed, made inquiries along the river and in Brazoria County where John worked. Everyone had been as surprised as she at the change in John. It was almost too good to be true. She had not, however, checked with the outlaws and rabble-rousers who frequented the saloons scattered throughout the county. They would certainly have had a different story to tell.

Since the announcement of her engagement to John, Poppy had been in an uproar. He had made inquiries himself, and had received the same reports that Laureli had received. He wanted nothing more than to prevent his granddaughter's marriage to the one man in all Brazoria County that the gentle Poppy despised. He could not bear the thought of his beautiful Laureli wasted on such a vile heathen. And he certainly could not bear the thought of him mauling his granddaughter in the bedchamber. The marriage was such a travesty. If Poppy could find a way to stop it, he would. He knew that he would be able to come up with damning evidence that would convince Laureli not to marry the man. Damn her for not giving him adequate time!

Court was lucky to be alive. The ship carrying him from England to New York Harbor had floundered in a storm ten miles from shore. Many people had been killed, but by the grace of God alone many had been saved, washing up on the eastern beaches, clinging to bits of floating debris, which was all that was left of

the English passenger ship, Windwalker. Court had received a serious wound when a nail had pierced his shoulder as he had been thrown overboard. He remembered very little of the sinking of Windwalker, except the very young girl who had clung to both him and a large piece of the hull as he had dog-paddled toward the shore.

He had spent the following five weeks in a hospital fighting the infection of the shoulder wound. It was late January before he began the second leg of his journey from New York around the Florida Peninsula, with three-day stopovers in Mobile and New Orleans before journeying on to Galveston Bay and the settlement at New Washington.

He fought the urge to kiss the Texas soil when he felt the solidness of earth beneath his boots. Just southwest of New Washington, on the Brazos River, his darling was probably out, ignoring the biting cold of late winter, and easing Belleza, her kindred spirit, into a fast lope over the familiar trails of Wildwood.

He purchased a horse from a trader in New Washington, then began the trip overland toward the Brazos. Each evening the winter-bare sky turned from gray to black, taking him closer to the woman he wanted to share his life with.

His dreams were filled with her, each identifiable feature of her lovely face: the pert nose, the full, sensual mouth, the almond-shaped powder-blue eyes that had held him with awe and fascination in one moment, and anger and rebellion in the next. Oh, how he missed her. How his body longed for her nearness, to feel her passion-sensitive flesh fused to his own, to feel her softness yielding to his masterful, masculine caresses. It had taken him a year of fighting his own devils to realize how much Laureli meant to him. He did not want to face the future without her. She was everything he wanted, everything he needed; the blood of life that surged through his veins and his heart.

By nightfall on the fourth day he reached the settlement of Bolivar on the Brazos, a few miles north of Wildwood. Exhausted after his many hours in the saddle, he decided to stable his horse for the night and stopped off at a saloon, hoping a couple of beers would relax him. He entered the large, rowdy room filled with cigar smoke and the maniacal laughter of bawdy women slinging themselves at card players and drinkers. He could barely see ten feet in front of him when he sauntered up to the bar and ordered a beer. But he heard a familiar voice; he would never forget that sneer.

“I’ll tell you fellas,” Johnny Raines was boasting to four other men at a card table, “I’ll be marryin’ that sweet little thing come tomorrow night, and come hell or high water, from that moment on she’s goin’ to be wishin’ she was dead!”

One of the men remarked rather absently, “You already got two wives, Raines —one in San Antonio and one on the Sabine!”

‘‘And both cows!” Johnny Raines laughed wickedly. “But this one!” He pinched the tips of his fingers together and kissed them. “She’s a beautiful, wealthy bitch! Before I finish with her she’ll be groveling in the dirt like I had to do when I was growing up as a shunned bastard!”

“Because...” The slur of alcohol was heavy in his voice. “She thinks oV Johnny’s become a gentleman. An’ that bastard kid of hers... I’ll be kickin’ his butt for the next eighteen years. I can promise you fellas that. The little brat’s goin’ to be wishin’ he’d never drawn his first breath.”

Court kept a cool demeanor. He didn’t know who the unfortunate lady was that Raines boasted about, but he didn’t like what he was hearing.

Johnny Raines pushed himself away from the card table after drunkenly pulling his empty pockets inside out, then calmly drank down his beer and left the bawdy establishment. Court stood on the boardwalk, listening to Johnny and a giggling half-clothed female moving clumsily and nosily up narrow stairs to the bedroom where the women took their paying customers.

The proprietor of the livery allowed Court to sleep in a corner of the stable that night. He arose, refreshed, washed off in a large tub at the back of the livery, ate an early breakfast at the saloon and resumed his journey by mid-morning.

Unless Providence intervened. Court estimated that he would pull into Wildwood by mid-afternoon.

That Friday morning, Laureli had awakened with tears streaming down her face. Pietra had never ceased her two-week bout of sobbing. Poppy and Jessie were still trying to force reason into Laureli before she made such a terrible mistake. Consuelo merely shrugged her shoulders, fully aware that the young mistress of Wildwood would do as she pleased. Actually, Consuelo could not see what all the fuss was about. Johnny had changed. He had even been cordial to Consuelo these past few months, whereas before he had cursed and reviled her at every opportunity.

Consuelo made a few alterations to the wedding gown in the morning hours, then assisted Laureli in choosing the proper accessories for the ribbon roses that Tia had reluctantly made as a bridal bouquet, since no fresh flowers were available this time of the year. The only invited guests were her family, the ranch hands, and dear Solon, whom she considered as much family as her own parents. He would have to give her in marriage, since both Poppy and Jessie had refused.

Laureli walked around in a half-stupor throughout the day. She scarcely ate a bite, and that which she did eat was meant to simply pacify Pietra, who had been grating on her nerves for weeks now.

“Pietra, you must stop that crying!”

Pietra held her handkerchief to her face and sniffed quite indelicately. “It is

such a mistake. My beautiful senorita marrying such a pendenciero! How can you... how can you break our hearts!”

‘‘How can you call him a bully, Pietra?” Laureli argued. ‘‘He has been a perfect gentleman. I’ve had no bad reports about him for the past six months. People do change, you know! Besides, this is my decision, and I believe that you should respect that.”

“You cannot tell me that man has changed. No... not that one!” Pietra countered vehemently. “He has not changed! He simply wants you to think he has! Simply so that he can get the land your parents will leave you and to make your life, and the life of your bambino miserable!”

Again sobbing uncontrollably, Pietra dropped heavily into a chair at the table. Quietly, Laureli rose and her hand scooted across Pietra’s plump shoulder. “Pietra, I have lost the one man in all the world that I truly love. I will never see him again. My parents have not been told about my little Daniel because I am too ashamed to tell them I am unwed. Please understand, dear Pietra... please understand that I am trying to do what is right for Daniel, as well as for me.”

“But that despicable Johnny Raines! He will hurt you!

“He will not,” she countered, her arms going around Pietra’s shoulders to squeeze her affectionately. “There is Joe and Poppy and Jessie to protect me.”

“Poppy is very angry with you.”

“That may very well be,” Laureli replied. “But he still loves me. If I have misjudged John Raines, then I will simply extract myself from a very unhappy marriage.”

Pietra gasped, her eyes as wide as china saucers. “Divorce? Senorita, you will not consider divorce! It is against the teachings of the Church!”

“The teaching of your church, dear Pietra. We Cades are not Catholic. Besides, I will not believe that the Lord would bind me to a marriage that was not pleasant for me. Now... enough said,” Laureli said wearily, withdrawing her hands. ‘‘I am to be married this evening and we simply must restrain from all this crying. Lord knows, I have done my fair share.”

Pietra sniffed. “And I will pray to our Lord that somehow he will send a savior. Pietra is very unhappy with the man you have chosen.” With that declaration, Pietra rose. ‘‘I will go to my bedside and I will pray, senorita. I will pray for your salvation and your soul.”

“You do as you please.” Laureli gave her a sad smile as she left. Pietra was taking her marriage to John Raines much too hard. She had yet to realize that there was no salvation for the young woman. Laureli’s only hope for salvation had disappeared into the winter woodline on a rented sorrel gelding more than a year ago.

In order not to think about Court and thus end up at her own wedding this evening with tear-swollen eyes, Laureli went to the nursery and spent the afternoon with her darling son. How like his father he was: his eyes like dark little wells, a tiny dimple in his left cheek, the very thin scatterings of dark hair across the crown of his head. She picked Daniel up and held him to her, laughing as he tangled his plump little fingers in the loose curls of her hair. He cooed, his face breaking into a smile when she puckered her lips, then she had to extract his playful fingers from her mouth.

‘‘You are such a little man,” she whispered endearingly. “Oh, I do wish your father could see you. He would be so proud... so proud of his own Daniel.”

Laureli could not prevent the steady flow of tears as she pressed Daniel’s warm cheek to her moist one. He seemed to understand, for his tiny arms slid around her neck. He was still for a long, long while until Laureli returned him to the soft mattress and tucked the downy blue blankets around him.

John had insisted on seeing Laureli that day, although it was supposed to be unlucky to see the bride before the actual wedding. He had stood outside the nursery and had heard Laureli’s tender words as she had spoken of her son’s true father. He gritted his teeth, simultaneously balling his hands into tight, knuckle-white fists. “You bitch!” he sneered at the closed door. “I’ll make your life miserable starting tonight after this damned wedding. I swear that to you!” Quietly, Johnny moved from the corridor and down the stairs. When he saw Consuelo’s daughter, Pavina, dusting in the parlor where the wedding would be held, he smiled a most insincere smile. “Thank you, senora, for allowing me to see Miss Laureli.”

Pavina merely shrugged. She had an attitude of indifference very much like her mother’s. Marrying Johnny Raines was already bad luck to Laureli. She could not see where it would hurt any tradition in allowing him to see her.

Meanwhile, in the nursery, Laureli stood beside the crib until Daniel fell fast asleep, then extracted the little wooden toy from his hand and put it on the dresser. In departing, she touched her fingertips to his warm crimson cheek.

She began dressing for the ceremony at half past five and the preacher arrived at half past six. Consuelo fussed with her hair, drawing it up and beneath a tiara that held a shoulder-length blue veil over her hair.

At a quarter before the hour, Laureli surveyed her appearance in the cheval mirror in the corner of her bedchamber. Consuelo had done a beautiful job of altering the gown; it fit her tiny figure perfectly. She puffed out the elbow-length bouffant sleeves, then smoothed them down again. She drew up her bodice, adjusted it and readjusted it so many times that Consuelo hinted that she might possibly be stalling for time. Downstairs, the only organist in the county, Mrs.

Belafont, was beginning to play every wedding processional she knew that were customary preludes to the “Wedding March.” She heard the chatter of many children, the approach of wagons, the sinister murmurings of the preacher as he began to place the participants in the wedding at their proper positions. She heard Ilona’s patient voice as she spoke to her own little Sarah. Ilona had agreed to serve as her matron of honor, despite her misgivings as to her friend’s choice of mates. Everything was happening just as if this were a happy affair.

But it was more like a funeral for Laureli, and her eyes began to dart with terrifying panic as she sought an escape route. Dear Lord, what had she done? Why had she agreed to become the wife of the man most despised in all of Brazoria County?

Almost as if the chords of Satan’s orchestra had started to play, the ‘‘Wedding March” began to waft through the rooms and corridors of Wildwood with haunting clarity. Drawing a long, steady sigh of resignation, Laureli turned toward the door, which Consuelo held open for her. She slowly descended the stairs, hesitating at each one, trying to relax her breathing that had increased in such intensity that she felt smothered and unable to breathe. She only vaguely remembered reaching the corridor, taking the very solemn Solon Delano’s arm and entering the throngs of her large family and many friends seated on either side of a narrow aisle that had been cleared for her entrance. She saw nothing but a blur, and even Johnny’s blank, waiting face was nothing more than a shadow in the large well-lit room. Her heart wrenched with panic, even as she eased through the many chairs that sat about, and she soon stood at the side of the man she had once despised and who would, in a matter of minutes, be her husband. Suddenly, another panic settled within her: Wedding nights customarily followed wedding ceremonies. Would she be able to bear that man, regardless of the change that had come over him, clawing at her beneath the sheets of her bed?

When Solon stepped away and John took his place beside her, his hand fell briefly to Laureli’s arm, but he did not otherwise touch her. He did, though, notice that she shivered beneath his touch, and that her skin was prickled with goose bumps. He took great pride in her panic, and in the commitment that she had made to him. He had, indeed, played a straight hand of cards this time. In the years to come she would pay a thousand times over for every blister she had raised on his flesh that cold January night.

Momentarily, the droning of the Baptist preacher began, but Laureli scarcely heard it above the murmurings of her family.

“We are gathered, my friends, to witness rites belonging to an institution as old as the human race. Marriage was founded by our Father in the Garden of Eden and there witnessed by the angels. Marriage, then, is divine—divine in its origin,

and its vows should never be lightly assumed. Hence, how grateful we are when friends come as you have, that you may have not only the sanction of the state, but the blessing of religion as well—’’

Suddenly, the words were lost in a vast vortex of soundless screams. She felt the appropriate movements of her own body, and John’s. She was aware of the lowering of her eyes and th« tears that filled them. She found the moment to be thankful for the veil that hid her tears from the view of the man who would soon be her husband.

John absorbed every word spoken by the minister with morbid fascination. He grinned wickedly as the preacher continued: “If anyone can show just cause why this man and this woman may not be joined together, I exhort him that he should have made known such objection before the day of marriage. If that was not possible, then let such objection be voiced before this God-sanctioned service is continued.”

“I have many objections, sir!” Every guest twisted in his or her seat, and Johnny whirled about so quickly that he almost knocked Laureli off her feet. When at last she found the moment to turn her head, she saw Court standing in the wide doorway of the foyer with two Texas Rangers behind him.

“Court,” she murmured, scarcely able to believe that he was any more than an apparition created by her desire for him.

Court watched Laureli with a strange mixture of desire and anger that she should have chosen to take such a man as a husband. He had learned upon reaching the Traylor settlement to the north of Wildwood that Laureli was the man Johnny Raines planned to marry, and that the child he had mentioned might very well be his own. He had arrived there shortly after the noon hour, had remounted his horse and returned at a fast pace to Bolivar, where he had informed the authorities of the proposed marriage of John Raines, a man already married to two women. Because the crimes of the bigamist had been committed in more than one county, the local marshal had asked for the intervention of the Texas Rangers.

The preacher did not have the moment to ask the grounds for Court’s objections before the panicked Raines darted out a side corridor of the parlor with the two Texas Rangers in hot pursuit.

Laureli stood riveted to the small space of floor she occupied. She could not move. She heard nothing but the silence of a very noisy room with Pietra’s sob of relief and blessings to the Father who had heard her prayers. She watched Court slowly yet confidently ease down the narrow aisle among the mumbling, smiling guests and did not protest as he took her hand and held it gently between his own. He did not take his eyes from her as he asked the preacher, ‘‘Do you

have the sufficient documents to file with the county authorities? I am the man who is entitled to marry this woman."

"By what authority, sir?" the preacher asked with some indignation, trying, with one raised hand, to still the mutterings of the wedding guests.

"By the authority of my love for this woman," Court replied soberly.

"And this woman?" the preacher questioned, turning his bespectacled eyes to the very pale Laureli.

The stunned Laureli replied quietly, "I agree. Court McKennon is the man I truly wish to marry."

Court asked, "Give me a minute to speak to Miss Cade," at which time the preacher stepped down and mingled with the guests, shrugging his shoulders. The annoyed preacher did not understand the jubilation of the crowd. Court drew Laureli off to the side and rested his arm across her satin-clothed shoulders and tried to watch her tearful eyes through the thin blue veil. He knew he had to smell terrible after his four days in the saddle, but all he cared about at the moment was Laureli. Her eyes held his steady gaze, yet she did not smile. She was still in a mild state of shock at his very timely intervention.

"I want to know, Laureli," he said softly, "when your son was born."

"The fourth day of October," she replied, only now dropping her eyes, "Are you saying, Court, that you did not know about him?"

"Not until today, Laureli. If you think I have returned only because of him, you are wrong. You are the one I have returned to. The child is a very welcome bonus. I am sure you can assure me that no man has touched you but me.

Even as he spoke with conviction, she sensed the negative note in his voice. Certainly, he had a right to have doubts. She could not be angry with him for it. Thus, she raised her eyes proudly. "No man," she replied in her same quiet tone.

"And may I know the name you have given... our..."

Only now did Laureli smile, though her smile was accompanied by the tears in her pale-blue eyes. "His name is Daniel."

"And may I see him?"

Laureli turned toward the crowd and pointed. "There is your son, Court... in Consuelo's arms."

As if he had suddenly been drawn from a deep, hypnotic sleep. Court lightly squeezed her fingers before turning away from her. He moved back through the crowd, then stood before Consuelo. He gave the chubby baby boy a long, open look before he softly, persuasively enticed him into his arms. As the very candid Consuelo remarked that Court smelled like a musky old saddle, tears glazed his eyes as he held his firstborn son to his shoulder, a son he had not known about until today. Then, drawing a deep, even breath to still the tremor, and the pride,

that had risen within him, he handed his boy back to Consuelo, returning her bright smile as he turned back to the makeshift pulpit where the preacher was once standing.

Court moved toward Laureli and again took her hands. “I will not question your motives for agreeing to marry Johnny Raines, Laureli. I know you did not ever expect to see me again, and that a child needs a father. I will not even question you as to why I was not informed of his birth. But thank God, I saved my son from that despicable monster. After this moment, Johnny Raines is never to be mentioned between us again. Agreed?”

“Yes,” she replied, only now allowing a smile to touch her mouth. “And although you smell like a horse, I believe you have a wedding to attend. We shall reevaluate your physical needs before consummation of our marriage.” She spoke so that only he could hear.

Court laughed, drew his hand across her shoulder and returned to the space of floor where Laureli and Raines had stood just moments before. He did have a fleeting thought of the dark-haired man, jilted at the altar, and he wondered how much distance he had been able to put between himself and the Texas Rangers. Court was pretty sure that Raines would never trouble them again. He would be a fool to return to the Brazos. But again, what could one expect of a fool?

The preacher was just about to begin reading from his own marriage manual when Court spoke up.

“Sir, I wish to speak to this woman before our exchange of vows.”

“Very well, sir.”

The murmuring died down in the large parlor; even Pietra’s sobbing had been silenced for the first time in two weeks. Each word Court spoke was heard separately, distinctly, as Laureli watched his travel-weary features.

“Love is very patient, very kind; love knows no jealousy; love makes no parade; gives itself no airs, is never rude, never selfish; never irritated, never resentful, love is never glad when others go wrong. Love is gladdened by goodness, always slow to expose, always eager to believe the best, always hopeful, always patient. Love never disappears. And Laureli, this is the magnitude of my love... a love I wish to receive in turn.”

“And it is given freely and willingly, my beloved,” she whispered, both their gazes, simultaneously, turning to the preacher.

The rest of the ceremony was like a dream for the two lovers, as Court placed upon her finger an engraved gold band he had purchased in Southampton before sailing, assuring her, as he briefly touched his mouth to her cheek, that her not having one for him was of no concern right now.

The preacher deliberately kept the service short, and in a matter of moments

directed the young woman to repeat after him, ‘‘Entreat me not to leave thee—”

“Sir,” Court interrupted, ‘‘these vows I will repeat with my betrothed. Please begin again.”

The preacher was visibly taken aback by Court’s declaration. The vows had been written strictly for the declarations of a woman. This was certainly a marriage ceremony he would not soon forget.

“Very well, repeat after me: “Entreat me not to leave thee. Or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” The preacher cleared his throat. “And now, by the authority vested in me as a minister of the gospel, and in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I pronounce you man and wife. Therefore, what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

Laureli’s family and friends gathered around the bride and groom. Poppy patted Court’s back. “Proud to have you in the family, Court.” Then he whispered to Laureli, “Forgive me, granddaughter.”

“There is no need,” she replied, smiling as she took his hands briefly, then touched her mouth to his rough cheek in a gentle kiss. “There is no need for forgiveness where there is love.”

Consuelo innocently chimed in, “What will be the first duty of the new husband and wife?”

To which Laureli laughingly, lovingly replied, “Bathing this horse of a man while you, my dear family... my dear friends,” she continued, taking Solon’s hand and kissing his cheek, “indulge yourselves at the banquet tables. The bride and groom shall join you shortly.”

Court had again taken his son, but the little fellow had immediately begun to cry. ‘‘You’ll like me better,” Court laughed, handing him back to Consuelo, ‘‘when I don’t smell so bad!”

Duty to family and friends denied Court and Laureli the intimate moments they wanted to spend together after his bath. All through the evening festivities, the guests indulged themselves at the banquet tables, then exercised off full stomachs in lively dances that frequently carried the vivacious dancers out on the veranda, where the children were shooting off fireworks. But Court and Laureli had eyes only for each other and their mutually shared joy, little Daniel. She had never seen such pride in Court’s eyes as he had held his little son, surrendering him to Consuelo for a trip upstairs only when he fell asleep against his father’s shoulder.

Court couldn’t imagine being happier than he was at this very moment.

And Laureli wondered what she had done to deserve so rich a reward as the

kind, loving husband she would have in Court McKennon.

She couldn't help but wonder if Pietra's prayers might have had something to do with it.

The very religious Pietra would certainly think so.

Chapter Nineteen

As the wedding guests began to disperse to their homes and back to the bunkhouse, Laureli found herself thinking of those moments just after the ceremony when she had sat on the edge of her freshly made bed. She had watched Court, her husband of only a few minutes, rise without modesty from the large iron tub that Pavina had slipped up to warm with kettles of hot water from the kitchens. Consuelo's eldest daughter had been required to miss part of the ceremony to do that for Court, and Laureli was grateful to her for her thoughtfulness.

Laureli smiled to herself. Could Pavina's kind act have been motivated by the muskiness of Court's unwashed body, which had not gone unnoticed by the guests? Laureli, however, cared only that Court had returned to Wildwood, and that he loved her. At the moment, she wouldn't care if he smelled like a thousand horses and old saddles. As she sat quietly in one of the parlor chairs, watching Court move among the guests, she allowed her thoughts to pleasantly drift off to those moments they had shared upstairs just after the wedding ceremony.

She had leaned back on her elbows and had watched Court briskly rub his hair with the clean towel she had brought to him, then wrap the same towel around his slim hips and his well-endowed groin. He had turned toward her, and a smile instantly had touched his mouth.

‘‘Why are you looking at me like that?" he had asked, approaching her, combing back his thick, dark hair as he did so. "Are you making jest of me, my good wife?"

"I was thinking how casually you bathe in my presence, dear husband. Just three hours ago I was standing next to another man to be married, thinking that you were lost to me by time and distance, and now you are my husband, and the rightful father of my infant son. It just amazes me that you can be so casual. Surely, you must be as surprised by this turn of events as I am."

Court had sat on the bed beside her and his hand had slipped beneath the loose gathered ruffles of her bodice at her shoulder. Tenderly, he had eased the fabric down her arm, then touched his mouth in a gentle caress to the warm skin he had just exposed.

"I am casual," he had remarked, "because I am exhausted after four weary months of travel. But—" His eyes had twinkled with mischievous merriment, and he said, "Not too exhausted to consummate our marriage this night, my

beloved. Besides, you must remember that I came back with no thought in my mind but making you my wife. You are the one who should have been surprised, because you are the one who did not know I was returning."

"Well said, my beloved," she had quietly responded. "And I am blissfully surprised. Tonight my life is beginning... rather than ending."

Drawn now to surprised alertness by a face hovering over her, and a very mellow voice whispering her name, Laureli saw her beloved Court grinning almost rakishly at her. "The wedding guests have decided to allow us to bow out of the remaining night's revelry. Would you like to accompany me upstairs?"

Silently, Laureli took his hand and rose, feeling as though she were floating, rather than walking at his side. Soon, they stood together in the bedchamber they would share, basking in the warmth of each other's bodies as they were content merely to hold each other for a long while.

Then, pulling from his embrace with a delightful laugh, Laureli removed her headpiece and veil, tossing them toward the daybed, then began to twirl and twirl until she found herself back in Court's arms. Her satin wedding gown molded to his firm, muscled, naked body. ''My beloved husband, we are together, alone... and I want only to be in your arms tonight."

Drinking in her beautiful declaration, Court eased her to the bed and covered her slim body with his own. He teased her with brief kisses, beginning at her closed violet eyelids, to her crimson cheeks, then imprisoning her mouth ever so gently against his own.

Court mentally cringed as he remembered how close he had come to losing her tonight. The marriage certainly would not have stood up in court due to Raines's acts of bigamy but his vile hands would have assailed this lovely feminine flesh that was meant for his touch only. He could not bear to think of that pagan swine mauling the woman he had made his, who was his wife and the mother of his tiny son. As he held his new wife's lovely features for a long, lingering moment, he felt the heavy droop of his eyelids and the urge within him to merely slump upon the pillow and draw her to him.

"My darling," Laureli whispered, as much aware of his exhaustion as he was. "We have a lifetime together. Tonight, I am content to have you sleep beside me, to know you are my love and that tomorrow and a thousand tomorrows hence we shall awaken in each other's arms."

As Court dropped his dark, damp hair to the mound of pillows, he drew her to him. There were so many things he had to tell her, and so many confessions to make. He wanted to tell her that he had always loved her, that he had always known in his heart that he would return to her. He wondered if she harbored resentment that he had not returned to her before the birth of their child. Surely,

when she had written the letter to him in San Francisco, she had known of her pregnancy.

Perhaps, unselfishly, she had hoped that her love would bring him back, and not the obligations of a child. He had to admire her for having the courage to stand on her own two feet. But he had to mentally admonish her for denying him the months when he could have anticipated the birth with her, when he could have felt the stirrings beneath his palm of a new life that he had helped create.

"I don't know what I would have done, Laureli, if I had returned and you had brought another man into your life. No, not Johnny Raines, but a decent man who could make you happy—perhaps a man who would be as willing as I am to make you happy."

''Only you can make me happy, Court. I could never love any man but you."

"I want you to know," he said, smiling as he closed his eyes, enjoying the sweet perfume of her clean, sunset tresses, "that I announced to everyone in England that I was taking you for my wife. My queen stood beside me while I made the announcement..."

Laureli drew in a deep, startled breath. "You know Queen Victoria?" she asked, thinking, perhaps, that the wine he had consumed during the banquet had made him light-headed and confused.

Court merely chuckled, caressing her shoulder beneath the satin fabric as he did so. "Know her? She is my cousin... actually, a fifth or sixth cousin half a dozen times removed, but a cousin nonetheless."

Laureli rested her tousled head on his bare shoulder, absently moving her fingers through the matted hair of his chest. She was willing to banter words of jest and humor with him because she loved him so. "And do you have a royal title, Court?"

''In England, yes... I am a lord... here, in this grand state of Texas, no... I am simply mister. I want you to meet my cousin, the queen, one day, Laureli."

Laureli continued to massage his firmly muscled chest. "Oh, dear, how would I address a queen? Her Majesty, Her Royal Highness—"

''Her Royal Lowness..." Court countered with humor. "She is less than five feet tall. But, by God, a dynamic little lady!"

The mischievous twinkle in Laureli's almost white eyes gave Court pause to reconsider the course of their conversation. Although she was his wife now, he was not ready to confess this part of his life. He was a foreigner, and it was very important to him that he fit into her world—not be the distant member of the English royal family and a favored cousin of Queen Victoria. Thus, he hugged Laureli's shoulder firmly and laughed.

"My sweet little Texas innocent. I am only teasing you. As you already know, I

was nothing more than a detective at Scotland Yard, then a self-imposed bounty hunter and rogue. Now hush, my darling," he continued, slipping beneath the sheet and blanket of the bed and drawing her to him. He began to unfasten the stays of her gown, sliding the bodice down the length of her body along with her undergarments and tossing them to a side chair. He remembered this naked beauty as though it had filled his gaze only yesterday: the tiny waist that had not been widened by the birth of their son, the small, firm breasts, proud and uplifted. His eyes drank greedily of her mesmerizing beauty, even as his hands rose and removed the tiara that held her hair in place. As it cascaded down her shoulders, he drew it to his face in a gentle caress.

"All my dreams have been fulfilled, Laureli... my sister is well again, though not quite walking... and you, the most comely of women in all of Texas—indeed, the world—are my wife. I have a fine, healthy son. I would be a greedy bastard if I thought I could have more, or better, than I have now. One day, when we visit England, I will proudly introduce you into my family." "I am your wife. Court... whither thou goest I will go—"

"I have tasted Texas," he replied huskily, his dark gaze meeting her pale one. "And the taste is sweet as wine. I drank of your essence, Laureli, and I am yours, body, soul, and heart. I know this land belongs to your parents, but I will make a home for you and Daniel one day... a home of our own, on our own land."

"Wildwood is vast," Laureli informed him. ''My father set aside four thousand acres in the event that I should ever marry. It is our land... yours and mine and Daniel's. It is my dowry, and as a gentleman, you must accept it."

"I am not too proud to accept a dowry," Court chuckled. ''Especially when I will spend thousands on a house as grand as this one, because I want only the best for you, Laureli. Even as we speak, quality goods are arriving by ship from throughout Europe for the house I will build for you. A castle for my queen."

"And how did you manage that when you have been traveling to me?"

He told her about the shipwreck and his weeks in the hospital, during which he had contracted for the materials by sending out for a reputable merchant and paying him cash up front to begin the purchasing and shipping negotiations.

Laureli frowned at the thought that Court had been hurt. She didn't ever again want him to suffer pain. There had been enough of that in the past.

Laureli shifted her body closer to his own, which immediately caused him to respond with "Oh, God!"

Her face lifted and alarm widened her youthful gaze. "Did I hurt you?" she inquired, her eyes fleeting over his finely chiseled masculine features.

Roughly, he took her arms, pulling her even closer. His sensual smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. ''Hurt me? You're damned right you did, my little vixen!

You have aroused me!”

As she realized what had happened—a realization born in the tautness of his groin against her smooth thigh—Laureli giggled mischievously. ‘‘I beg your pardon, sir!” she quipped with feigned indignation. ‘‘I did not do that!’’ Playfully, the fingers of her left hand walked down his firm chest and stomach, then ripped away the towel he had moments ago tucked around his waist. He was indeed aroused and she very much liked what she saw. In a teasing gesture, she folded her hands on his chest and rested her chin upon them. ‘‘But you must too tired to nurture such a shady emotion as passion, are you not, husband?”

With a long, low groan. Court grabbed her arms and pulled her over the full length of his body. Her legs straddled his slim hips, and she merely refolded her hands as a perch for her chin.

Court gave her a somewhat reproving look. “Are you simply going to lie there looking at me like that? When I am in such dire pain and you are the remedy?”

“What would you suggest?” she continued to tease him.

“I would suggest... no, order,” he continued, trying not to smile and betray his own teasing affection for her, “that you seduce me. I promise that I will be very receptive to it.” As he spoke, his hands caressed her upper arms, flowing smoothly over her shoulders and back, then around to lightly cup her firm breasts, which moments ago, had branded his chest with their fire.

The seriousness in his voice—his wondrously knitted brows—had pried a smile from her. She enjoyed the masterful movements of his hands as they trailed along her slender sides, briefly circled her waist, then moved along the gentle curve of her hips.

“I’ll wager that you were beautiful when you were carrying our son,” he reflected, the affection strong in his voice.

‘‘I was fat... miserably fat!” she argued quietly, her long, loose hair like auburn clouds upon his chest as his right hand rose to the back of her neck and pulled her close.

As Court captured her mouth in a long, lingering kiss, Laureli unexpectedly shifted her weight, and he groaned as the full length of him slipped into the memorable warmth of a treasure he had not enjoyed for too, too many months.

She moved gently upon him, enjoying his playful kisses, the rough, almost demanding caresses of his hands. His muscular chest tensed beneath her own caress and she arched her back, throwing the masses of her hair back as he moved beneath her, driving the full length of his manhood deeply into the exotic depths of her. Then with a very low groan he pulled her close and exchanged positions with her without breaking the connection. For exquisite moments that seemed like a thousand hours, they shared magnetic movements and motions

that drew quickly toward the wondrous fulfillment that only two people so deeply in love could enjoy. Court's mouth assailed her taut yet tender flesh that fused to his caresses.

Only when they lay in rapturous exhaustion did the horror of what had almost happened earlier in the evening hit Laureli with brutal force. It may have been Johnny Raines's vile body fused to her own, rather than the loving one of Court McKennon, the man she loved. She visibly shuddered.

"Are you cold?" Court whispered, easing to her side and drawing her close to him beneath the covers.

"Not when I lie beside you," she replied as quietly. "The fire is burning down in the hearth, yet the warmth there is not as great as I feel lying beside you, knowing that for all time we will be together. I am so happy, Court." Again she shuddered. "When I think that I might have—"

His hand firmly circled her shoulder, pulling her close. "That did not happen, Laureli. We are together, and nothing, save death, will part us. I am only sorry that I let my stubborn pride keep us apart for so long."

"Court?"

"Yes?"

"You never actually... hated me, did you?"

"I always loved you," he replied, regretting the months they had lost together. "I will not lie to you, Laureli. I was very angry, and very hurt. I felt deceived, but that is in the past now. We are all human and we all make mistakes. God knows, I have made my fair share." He had hesitated to mention it all through the evening, but now he felt that it was a very vital declaration that had to be made. "I know that I was wrong about Gye Bedford. Colleen was not raped, although she was not given much notice of Gye's intentions. When she was injured, it was an accident. Bedford tried to keep her from falling. It was all a terrible misunderstanding created by the unintentionally falsified testimony of a man who saw Colleen and Gye together. Please believe, Laureli, that I am truly sorry he is dead. He was a very distant cousin of mine, you know."

Laureli drew in a deep breath of sudden surprise. But in the same moment, she very vaguely recalled that Court had made some reference to him as distant kin. She had probably been too angry and rebellious to pay much attention to anything he'd had to say about Wynn

Garrett. "I believe I may remember something to that effect."

"He was a McKennon... just like me. Where he picked up the stage name of Gye Bedford, or the alias of Wynn Garrett I will never know. Perhaps some souls who did him kindnesses somewhere in his journeys. I would like to see a headstone put on his grave, with his proper name, Gye McKennon, engraved on

it.”

“There is a simple cross right now. But we will see that he gets the headstone.”

‘‘Where is he buried?”

“In our family cemetery.”

“Good... I’m glad of that,” he replied somberly.

“Then you forgive me for harboring him, Court?”

“I had no right to resent you for it. Therefore, I have no right to be forgiving or otherwise. I am the one who was unjustified. Not you.”

“Thank God it is all in the past. After tonight. Court, let us never speak of this terrible thing again.”

“That will please me just fine...” His eyes closed. Instinctively, his hand eased further beneath Laureli’s slim torso, so that she could rest her head against his shoulder rather than the pillow they shared. He closed his eyes, but he was too excited to sleep. He had spent months trying to get back to Laureli, including the weeks he had stayed in the hospital in New York. Logically, he should be exhausted. But sleep would deprive him of his enjoyments of Laureli, and he could not bear to lose one moment with her. Yet, at the same moment, he knew that his days and nights would be filled with her. The difference now was that he knew when he awakened she would be lying in his arms—his wife and the mother of his son.

As the fire in the hearth became bits of glowing ember, he turned his head so that he could watch Laureli’s now sleeping features. How lovely she was, her ivory skin like gold against the fire of the embers, her auburn tresses haloed by a gentle red glow, her sensual mouth parted, revealing her straight, white teeth. Slowly, his eyelids began to droop as the realization of their eternity together quietly sifted through his mind. In the morning he would awaken to warm flesh and smiling eyes—not mere memories.

Johnny Raines was furious. Since he’d bought a good, new horse in Bolivar, he had easily outdistanced the slow mounts of the two Texas Rangers. With the Indian troubles, which usually monopolized the attentions of that large police authority, Johnny was sure that a bigamist was very low on their list of priorities. Therefore, when he was sure that the cover of darkness had protected him and that the Rangers were miles away, Johnny returned to the small, ramshackle cabin he had called home. Before he entered the cabin, he walked out to the unmarked grave of his mother, the only evidence of its existence being the ground that had sunk in the years since the simple wood coffin had disintegrated. He had been fourteen when she had died and left him alone to become the pawn of men who had made him what he was today: a bully and a tyrant, and a very, very bitter man.

Thereafter, he broke into his cache of whiskey stored beneath the floorboards, and by morning he was so drunk he couldn't get off his dirty little cot, let alone stand up. Vengeance was like a canker sore inside of him, swelling out so that his skin prickled painfully every time he moved. If Laureli Cade thought that he had been deprived of the chance to make her life miserable, she was sadly mistaken. By mid-morning, as the headache of his hangover began to wear off, Johnny began cleaning the rusty old rifle that his adulterous father had bought for his mother to be used for protection. He found the jar of bullets, and for the next two hours he practiced shooting at the trees surrounding his cabin. Only when he was able to snap off the twigs at a hundred yards did he temporarily abandon the weapon to a sideboard in his cabin and begin to wash up.

The cover of darkness would not come soon enough for him.

It had been a long, exhilarating day at Wildwood. Laureli had put off the roundup of the rest of the yearlings until Monday, so that the men could enjoy the day. She smiled to herself, remembering how Court had yelped in surprise when he'd seen that Manuel's pup was now almost waist high. Between the massive size of the dog and Purgatory, Pietra's rooster, Wildwood had a security system unparalleled throughout Texas. Court had enjoyed a very emotional reunion with the little stable boy, who, last year, had taken to Court as a father. He had hardly moved from Court's side throughout the long day.

Right now, the men had gathered out by the stables and were engaged in horseplay. Despite the coolness of the early morning, the afternoon turned out to be warm. Laureli and Pietra sat on the veranda and watched Court and Joe, both bare to the waist, engaged in a bout of wrestling. The winner would be the one left standing, and for the past five minutes neither man had been able to unfoot the other. Bets were being placed and at the moment, Joe, being much stockier than the tall, slim Court, was the favored of the opponents.

Jessie, Poppy, and Derrick had ridden over, leaving their women and children to a full day of cooking and baking for the feast that all would enjoy at Little Wildwood at nightfall.

As the women watched the wrestling match between Joe and Court, little Manual darted quickly between the legs of one of the ranch hands and lightly bit Joe's leg. Caught off guard by the little saboteur, Joe did not see Court's leg swiftly move out, catch him behind the knee and bring him to his back on the packed earth. All the men bellowed with laughter as Manuel took off at a fast run just a few feet in front of the pursuing Joe. Then one of the younger men challenged Court, and this time Court was the one to land on his back.

With a tiny gasp, Laureli started to rush from the veranda, but Pietra held her back. "You will learn, senora," Pietra reprimanded affectionately, "that men who

are in the company of other men do not want their women fussing over them. You will strip him of his dignity if you make a scene."

Pietra's statement certainly made sense. She knew that she would learn many things from Pietra that would help to make her marriage a happy one. Laureli managed a small smile as she returned to the very wise woman's side. Court, rubbing his backside, was walking toward her, and Laureli pretended that she was unscathed by his defeat.

"That Jan Walters..." Court laughed, pulling on his shirt but leaving it unbuttoned. "He could bloody well bring down a mad bull if he had a mind to."

"Come, sit with your new wife," Pietra ordered in her rough but affectionate tone. "I will bring you nice cool glasses of tea, sweetened just the way you like it."

Court sat on the rattan settee and patted the unoccupied space beside him. "Come here and sit beside your husband. So, what did you think of my bout with Joe?"

"He'd have brought you down if Manuel hadn't bitten his leg!" Laureli laughed, easing to his side. Immediately, though, she drew back from him, crinkling her nose with distaste. "I do declare. Court! You smell like a horse again!

Court favored her with his pleasant, masculine laugh. "All that wrestling and all the dust. Later—" He lightly kissed her cheek. "I shall bathe. And I'll wager—" he continued on a teasing note, "that the tub is large enough for both of us."

"Only if we were stacked!" Laureli teased in return.

"I have no objections," Court laughed, easing his arm across her shoulders, "if you don't."

Their playful bantering of words ended when Pietra returned with a tray. She handed a tall, cool glass to each of the newlyweds, then took her own glass and sat in the chair across from them. Soon the men tired of their wrestling, and Jessie, Poppy, and Derrick joined Court and the women on the veranda. Without words, Pietra rose. Laureli thought she had retired to the house to avoid their company but within minutes she returned with three more glasses of tea. Laureli smiled to herself. Pietra's rebellion toward her family was diminishing. Perhaps the happy atmosphere of Wildwood had been a good influence on her.

In the course of conversation, Laureli learned that Merita was expecting another child and Pavina and her husband had engaged in a terrible spat that morning. A lot of domestic small talk kept the conversation going until well into the afternoon. Reminded that Joel, Jessie's youngest child, would be eight years old tomorrow, Laureli asked Poppy to choose one of the younger mares from the corral to present to the boy on his birthday.

“Don’t choose the little dapple,” Laureli called to him as he crossed the clearing. “I have promised that one to Manuel.”

Toward nightfall Poppy and Derrick decided to return to Little Wildwood to help the women set up the tables in the parlor. Jessie waited behind to take the mare Poppy had chosen and was content to sit in the kitchen with Pietra while Court and Laureli prepared for the ride over to the smaller ranch. He was not surprised that they took so long to prepare. Having been a newlywed himself once, he imagined that more than bathing and dressing was going on upstairs.

Pietra was being quite pleasant and even offered him a slice of one of the pies she had baked for the evening festivities. She had agreed to join them tonight, and Jessie was pleased. She had alienated herself from her sister, Tia, and the rest of the family for much too long. Perhaps she was letting old resentments die away, although Jessie had never quite understood how Pietra could have blamed Tia for the murder of her husband

d at the hands of Mexican soldiers.

At nightfall, Court and Laureli descended the stairs and joined them in the kitchen where they waited. Both looked a little flushed.

“Are we ready to go?” Court asked.

“We’ve been ready,” Jessie replied, winking at his aging aunt, ‘‘for an hour and a half. The wagon’s hitched up. We’ve been waiting for you two to... ah... finish your business.”

Laureli blushed furiously, very aware that Jessie was teasing her. Having so successfully embarrassed his niece, Jessie assisted Pietra in putting the two large baskets of pies in the back of the wagon, then called Manuel from the stables for the trip over to Little Wildwood.

Johnny Raines had been sitting astride his horse in the shadows of the timberline for half an hour, waiting for the sun to set. Sitting close enough to hear the men talking at the bunkhouse as they drew lots to see which of them would remain at Wildwood while the others rode over to the smaller ranch belonging to Poppy, he had heard Court’s name. He knew he would be exiting the house any moment now.

Jan Walters drew the only brown rock in the black, flat-brimmed hat that held a dozen white ones as well. His brother. Luck, promised to bring back a tray filled with food from the banquet tables.

All of the ranch hands had ridden out when Court and Laureli, carrying their son, walked out to the wagon to join Pietra and Manuel, who was trying to coax his big pup to return to the stable.

The dejected dog ambled away from his young master, his tail tucked between his legs, but he stopped and sat by the stable entrance and watched the humans

prepare to leave.

Jessie had just mounted his horse and had the small sorrel mare for Joel's birthday in tow when Manuel jumped up to the wagon, then scooted up to the seat where Court and Laureli were positioning themselves. "I sit beside you, Senor Court?" the boy inquired, his dark face piqued with anticipation.

"Sure, young fellow... right up between me and my new wife..." He winked at Laureli. "Can't think of a better place to be."

As Manuel started to jump up to the seat. Court dropped the house key he had just been about to tuck into his shirt pocket. He bent down to pick it up and in that precise moment, a shot rang out in the clear March night.

Laureli cried out and bent over to protect her infant son. Jessie dove from his horse and dragged the bewildered Pietra down, shoving her beneath the wagon.

As Court's tall frame straightened in the seat, the little stable boy who had endeared himself to the Englishman crumpled across his lap.

In the panic and the screams that pierced the air, Jan came running from the direction of the stables.

"God, what happened? I just saw Johnny Raines riding away at a fast pace."

Court had forced Laureli and his son down against the seat and now sat very quietly, holding Manuel across his lap. His hands covered with the child's blood, Court felt tears in his eyes as Manuel smiled up at him.

"I bring your horses, senor, for only a peso," the boy whispered, agony etched into his little dark face as he tried to smile.

"You hitch up my team, little fellow," Court replied, remembering the first words the child had spoken to him so long ago, "and I'll give you two pesos."

Manuel's face lit in a fleeting smile, but he gently closed his eyes. The weeping Court held the boy very, very close to him, close enough to feel the last God-given breath of life whisper against his cheek.

Lifting his tear-moistened eyes to the black night, he screamed, "God damn you... take me... not him!" While a bitterly sobbing Pietra moved back to the house with little Daniel huddled against her, Laureli pulled Court into her arms and wept with him.

She could not have loved a child, even her own, more than she loved the little stable boy.

Chapter Twenty

On that grim Monday morning after little Manuel was buried. Court locked himself away in the seldom-used study of Wildwood with a bottle of whiskey. He blamed himself for the child's death. If he had not returned to Wildwood, he would be alive today.

Court listened to no entreaties. Even Laureli met with sharp rebuke when she

attempted to draw him out of the study. After the long afternoon and half the night of listening to him drink and sob almost uncontrollably, she went out to the bunkhouse for Joe. But Joe gave the best advice she had received all day: Leave him alone to grieve. Thus, reluctantly, Laureli retired to their bedchamber and spent a long sleepless night without Court.

Sometime in the predawn hours she heard Court stumble out of the house, cursing when he reached the veranda, and the coolness of the morning mixed with his intoxication threatened to unfoot him. Tearfully, she stood at the window of the sleeping chamber and watched him move unsteadily across the clearing, toward the stable and the large oak at the woodline where the child had been buried. Scarcely able to see any more of him than a black outline, she watched him fall to his knees.

It hadn't occurred to anyone that no one knew his last name. It had not been given any thought until Joe began carving the child's name on the wooden cross that would he placed at the head of his grave. So Joe had carved, Manuel, beloved child of Wildwood, and the date of his death.

Laureli did not know what Court reached out to touch on the grave; perhaps the cross, perhaps the loosely packed dirt. She knew only that her heart was as broken as his.

What Court reached out to touch was the head of the big, grieving dog that had lost its young master. All through the afternoon and night the dog had lain across Manuel's grave with its massive head lying on its paws.

"You know," Court said quietly, the lump as large in his throat as all of Texas, "I think I'd feel better right now if you pounced and snuffed the life out of me. This is my fault... if I hadn't come back..."

But the dog merely raised its doleful eyes as Court spoke.

Silently, Court rose from his knees, stood at the foot of the grave for a long, solemn moment, then returned to the house. Eventually, he made his way up the stairs and collapsed into Laureli's waiting arms.

The following morning the big dog was gone from Manuel's grave.

No one ever saw him again, and the men at the bunkhouse believed that he had gone off somewhere to die alone. That morning when the tearful men had buried the body of the little stable boy, they had also buried the heart of the big dog.

Johnny Raines had put a hundred miles behind him by the morning of the boy's funeral. He was mad as hell that he had missed Court McKennon, and if Jan Walters hadn't appeared from the stable, he would have taken a second shot. The irony was that he was totally unaware that he had killed the boy.

He planned to put a few weeks of time between that Saturday night and his return home. By then the incident would be forgotten and he could just shrug off

the loss of Laureli Cade and the years of vengeance he had so meticulously planned. At least he did not have to play the role of the gentleman any longer. That had certainly been a crimp in his well-worn hat.

Once he had sufficiently recovered from the grief and the loss of his young friend, Court used his personal monetary resources at hand to print wanted posters that were distributed throughout Texas and Louisiana and to offer a reward of five thousand dollars for the capture of Raines. He was determined to see Johnny Raines tried and hanged. It became a new obsession within him—this terrible need for justice and vengeance, even as he continued to blame himself primarily for the death. He should have taken the bullet Johnny Raines had fired, not Manuel.

The long, warm days of spring somehow managed to dispel the gloom that had settled over Wildwood. Things began to return to normal: The men fussed among themselves, Pietra resumed her sniping at the most inopportune moments, and the blasted rooster. Purgatory, tried to spur one of Consuelo's grandchildren who had ridden over on a new pony. For nine years Wildwood had been ruled by that vicious beast. Laureli wondered how many lifetimes it had been given, and how many it had outlived. Frequently it sat on the corral gate, crowing at the setting sun. It no longer crowed in the morning as roosters were supposed to do. Its time clock had been off for several months now and its equilibrium was not what it used to be. Thus, it came as no surprise when the little Mexican rooster was found dead against the side of the stable early one morning. Pietra, of course, accused everyone on the ranch of murdering the poor, unfortunate beast. No one would have known what had happened if Jan had not seen it fly off the corral gate and hit the wall, instantly breaking its neck. But that was also an explanation Pietra was not willing to accept at face value.

Thus, she sniffed for days. Laureli, of course, sympathized with her loss... until one of Consuelo's grandchildren innocently brought her a bitty to raise. After everyone groaned at the tiny act of treachery, they hoped that the little creature would turn out to be a much more docile hen.

June, 1860

Since Court had traveled to San Antonio with Poppy, Laureli rode alone that hot summer evening. The sky was clear and blue with a thin line of crimson across the far horizon. Belleza snapped at the bit, fighting to break into a run as Laureli restrained her. It seemed almost impossible to hold back the mare.

Laureli was just passing the line cabin up from the Brazos when she saw the form of a man making movements with a pickax. Her curiosity aroused, she turned Belleza toward the rolling hills that led to the cabin and soon sat just a few feet from the strangest-looking little man she had ever seen. He was young,

thin and bespectacled, with a funny pair of wide khaki-colored pants cut off at the knees, and flapped pockets on his short-sleeved shirt. The crown of his hat was round, and his boots scarcely covered his ankles and a mismatched pair of socks. He evidently had not heard Laureli approach because his labors increased in intensity.

"What are you doing here?"

At the sound of her voice, the little man almost slipped on his buttocks. But he immediately regained his footing and focused on the mounted figure through his wire-rimmed spectacles.

"Madame," he puffed up, wielding the pickax as though he planned to use it. "You startled me! And what I am doing here would be of no interest to you!"

"I believe that it would," Laureli replied argumentatively, yet quietly. "I am Mrs. Laureli McKennon, this is my land and you are trespassing."

The staid features were moved only by a sudden pursing of needle-thin lips. "I, madame, am an antiquary."

"A what?" Laureli replied. She had never heard of such a thing.

"An antiquary. I study antiquities. I have been tracing the route of Cortez and his band of cutthroats from Mexico to the north. Whenever I find an indentation such as this..." He pointed to a large low level of earth. "And a hole like this..." he continued, pointing to the hole that Jessie filled every year on Christmas Day. "Then I stop and dig a little."

Laureli crossed her wrists on her pommel and frowned. "Oh, I see. You're a treasure seeker."

"Hardly, madame!" he huffed indignantly. "As I said, I am an antiquary... Wesley Rogers. Now..." He flicked his loose wrist at Laureli. "Kindly be on your way so that I can resume my labors."

He was so very strange and interesting that Laureli could not be offended. She smiled to herself and watched him resume picking at the ground with the ax, his movements effeminate, like a young child playing with a toy. "You may sleep in the line cabin if you like," Laureli offered.

He turned and gave her a thoughtful look. Only now did the slightest hint of a smile touch those thin lips. "I thank you, madame, but I shall pitch my tent for the night. I do hope you will not interfere in my explorations."

"Mr. Rogers..."

"Lord Rogers!" he amended in his indignant way.

Laureli thought he was a bit too arrogant for a trespasser. But he really wasn't doing much harm. She imagined that all he would come up with would be a few fossilized rocks, and perhaps even a few possum or armadillo bones. Certainly not a worthy treasure for someone with the title of antiquary. "Very well. Lord

Rogers, I would ask that you remedy any mess you make."

Laureli started to rein the horse back down the hill when the man's voice called out to her. "Madame." She halted and half turned in the saddle. "Madame, if I should find anything that substantiates Cortez's movement, I shall require more time to excavate."

Laureli shrugged her shoulders. "As long as you clean up your mess," she reiterated, coaxing the mare into a slow trot down the hill.

That evening at dinner she mentioned the peculiar little man to Pietra.

"Did he say what he was searching for?" Pietra asked.

"I would imagine the gold of Cortez. Men have been talking about it for years. And, quite frankly, I don't believe it exists. My mother said that Uncle Jessie claimed to have found the gold."

"Jessie? But he has never mentioned it."

"Mother said that Jessie was thrown from his horse and was drawn beneath the currents of the Brazos. He claimed to have washed up in a cave, where he was surrounded by the skeletons of Cortez's soldiers and more gold than one human should ever see in a lifetime.

But he had been delirious, and Mother said she was sure he had dreamed it all. When he recovered, Jessie tried to refind the treasure he claimed to have found, and did, indeed, search for months. But after the Alamo he suddenly lost interest."

"Jessie can be a little peculiar, too," Pietra replied. "Perhaps he and the—what did he say—Lord Rogers—could dig on the hill together. Men are such childish creatures, digging in the dirt and looking for treasures."

"If it makes men like Lord Wesley Rogers happy to dig, then let him dig."

The following morning, Laureli rode back to the hill to find the strange little foreigner pulling bones out of a hole six by eight feet wide that he had dug. She was intrigued. "What did you find?" she asked.

The English antiquary smiled, certainly surprising Laureli who had found him quite disagreeable the day before. "I have found, madame, the remains of a European horse at least three hundred years old. And look at this—" He held a piece of pitted metal that resembled an old nail with a circle at one end. "This, madame, is a Spanish bit. The leather bridle has long since rotted away, but this is very tangible proof that Europeans were here, on this very spot, three hundred years ago, and perhaps longer."

Laureli bent to her knee and examined the remains, which he was carefully digging around. It was, indeed, the skeletal remains of a horse, and a very large one. She imagined that it might have been white, like the stallion that had not been seen on the Brazos in over a year.

“I thought Spanish ponies were small,” Laureli queried, remembering something she had read in one of her father’s books.

“Most were,” Wesley Rogers replied, crisply and authoritatively. “But Cortez brought over a special breed of horse... a horse that was born black and turned white as it aged. Cortez was especially partial to white horses. And they were very large, well-muscled animals.”

Laureli held back her surprise at the short lesson in history the Englishman had given her. She had thought a lot about the white stallion for the past year, and had hoped to see it after she began riding again. But thus far, she had been disappointed. “Does this discovery mean that you will require more time to dig?” she asked.

For the second time this morning, the Englishman surprised her by being cordial. “If, madame, it will not inconvenience you. If I may stay—” He pointed to the small canvas tent erected a few yards away. “I shall leave my tent up until I have finished my excavations. Also, if you have no objections, I would like to keep the remains of this animal.”

“I don’t want it,” she replied, gently laughing. “It wouldn’t look very good on a mantel.” His narrow, appraising look was rebuke enough for the statement he found not the least bit amusing. He took his work very seriously, and he would not have its importance underrated by unnecessary humor. “Do you need any help?” she asked, attempting to salvage the moment. “Some of the young ranch hands are always looking for ways to make extra money.”

“No indeed!” he huffed in that way she had grown to expect, though she was not now offended by it. “Americans would pick at such delicate remains as though they were chewing through chicken fried in lard! This is a very tedious job, and I wish to do it myself.”

Intrigued by his work, Laureli stayed and watched a while. She could almost picture the horse as it may have looked; indeed, she wanted it to look like her white stallion. During the morning, she struck up friendly conversations with the somewhat stuffy Englishman, and by noon, when the rumblings of hunger began hinting that she should return home, she invited him to Wildwood for lunch.

“It is very kind, madame, but I eat very little—dried beef mostly, with a tiny glass of sherry. Lard around my waist would merely slow down my travels.”

“Very well,” she replied, stifling a moment of laughter that he would not appreciate. “Might I ride out later and see the progress of your work?”

“Indeed, madame, I have found your company most invigorating.” He smiled his thin-lipped smile as he dropped gracefully to his buttocks and removed a large brush from his waistline. He began flicking the dirt away from the remains as though he were polishing sterling silver. What an absolutely intriguing man he

was!

Of course, Joe was not happy with Lord Wesley's invasion of the ranch. He met Laureli at the stable and voiced his objections as he assisted her down from the saddle.

"He's hurting no one," she said, brushing the dust of travel from her thin cotton blouse.

"Court and Jessie will be back tomorrow afternoon," Joe reminded her, "And Jessie won't like the Englisher being up there."

Laureli raised a well-groomed brow. "How did you know he was English?"

Joe laughed. "I was talkin' to Pietra this morning. With a name like Lord Wesley Rogers, he damn sure ain't a Texan." Realizing that he had used an oath in the presence of his young employer, Joe grinned sheepishly. "Pardon, Miss Laureli." Although she was married now, Joe still called her by the endearing name he had given her as a young girl. "I sometimes forget I'm not in the company of the other men."

The two talked for a little while longer about the duties still to be done on the ranch, then parted company, Joe returning to the bunkhouse and Laureli sauntering slowly toward the garden gate. She wanted to sit and think for a while, think about Court returning home and wishing it were tonight instead of tomorrow.

She was thinking, too, about the Mexican nanny they had hired in Bolivar a week ago. She was a pleasant enough lady, fortyish, very proper and very well educated. But she had developed an annoying habit of cutting Laureli off from her son, pleading that he was asleep, that he had a slight fever, or some other nonsensical excuse that she did not accept. She imagined that Senora Ketti had been a very domineering employee of other households, and if she didn't watch her step, she would find herself an ex-employee at Wildwood. So far, Laureli had managed to have her own way and spend time with her son when she saw fit, but Senora Ketti had voiced her protests.

Laureli would give her another two weeks to amend her domineering ways, or she would have to go.

She stood up from the iron settee in the garden only when the aroma of dinner wafted through the air. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until that moment.

Lord Wesley Rogers worked well past midnight on his excavations of the ancient horse. He had found the iron stirrups of a Spanish saddle, as well as eroded ornaments, which hinted at the elaborate saddle that had once graced the magnificent animal. He was sure beyond a reasonable doubt that the horse had been one belonging to Cortez, and probably stolen by the men who had broken

off from his main party. Cortez had moved on toward what was now California, but a mutinous lot of his men had stolen a king's ransom in gold and horses and had moved to the northeast. There had always been speculation as to what had happened to the mutinous band, but no historian, or antiquary, thus far, had been able to solve the riddle. Lord Wesley Rogers hoped to be that man.

Before he retired to bed. Lord Rogers sat on his portable cot and ate his nightly ration of dried beef, washing it down with a goblet of sherry. He could hear the movements of his tethered packhorse as it grazed in waist-high grass just down the hill. The night sounds were very soothing: a slight breeze rustling through the woods, a hoot owl faraway, crickets and bullfrogs and, occasionally, a rumbling wagon to break the peace of the warm, humid night. Soon, he reclined in the small cot, with his fingers linked and resting lightly on his chest. The mosquito net perched precariously about him kept the vicious little insects from draining him of blood, a luxury he was sure would not have been afforded by the ramshackle line shack Mrs. McKennon had offered him. He was content, and in peaceful exhaustion, he finally fell asleep.

Thus, he was certainly dismayed and brought to the firm realization that he had no weapon when he heard the wild stamping of a horse outside the tent. He darted up from the cot, took up the slender, iron-tipped walking cane he frequently carried and rushed out into the darkness. The moon was full, and his packhorse was pulling wildly at the tether. Lord Rogers approached and attempted to still the beast, but it was almost a futile attempt. He calmed the horse only by leading it around to the back of the cabin and into the shadows of a narrow lean-to.

For mercy's sake! he thought, brushing at himself with such a ferocity that one might have thought he'd fallen into a grain bin. Who can know the mentality of a horse?

Suddenly, he found the entrance to his tent blocked by a large white horse and a boy straddled atop it. Lord Wesley shielded the glaring light of the moon with his hand perched above his eyebrows and tried to make out the features of the slim boy.

"What do you want?" Lord Wesley asked sharply, his voice so high in pitch that his moment of alarm was evident.

"I don't want you digging here," the boy answered quietly.

Lord Wesley was quite taken in by the massive size of the horse, its fetlocks long and silky, its hooves as black as soot despite the brilliant white of its coat. He was also surprised that the horse suffered from the same affliction as the skeletal remains of the animal he was excavating: bowed front legs. Even with that physical flaw, he had never seen so magnificent a beast.

“And you are impudent, young man!” Lord Wesley replied after a moment. “I have permission to dig here.”

“I have revoked that permission,” the boy replied quietly.

A strange, eerie fog seemed to surround the boy and horse. Lord Wesley shivered, despite the heat of the night. He tried to cut his eyes from the face of the boy who sat in dancing shadows, but he was almost mesmerized by it.

Lord Wesley’s voice softened. “By what authority do you revoke my permission?” he asked.

“I have no authority, save my own. I think it is sufficient.” The boy turned the horse away from the thin, bespectacled Englishman.

“Wait... if I must move on, tell me, what is your name?” He would certainly talk to Mrs. McKennon in the morning about this pompous boy. He had been given permission to dig, and dig he would. He would not be run off by the lad who had now halted the big horse. “Young man, I insist that you tell me your name!”

Without turning, the eerie voice replied, “Sam,” and spurred the horse into a fast lope. The young nightrider disappeared into a fog that suddenly arose, but which was gone as quickly as was horse and rider.

Shaking his head with discernment and ire. Lord Wesley returned to his cot. He was so furious that he could scarcely grab more than a few moments of sleep for the rest of the night.

Laureli sat in the nursery with Daniel while Senora Ketti breakfasted with Pietra. The two were fast becoming friends, and Pietra showed surprise when Laureli mentioned how disagreeable Senora Ketti was.

“But she is such a pleasant lady,” Pietra argued later, sipping a cup of coffee while Laureli ate her own breakfast.

“Then you had best have a talk with her about her attitude,” Laureli suggested. “I don’t appreciate feeling like an intruder in the nursery. Daniel is, after all, my son, and not hers.”

“I will talk to her,” Pietra offered. “I rather like her, and I would like for her to stay.”

After breakfast, Laureli met with Joe and went over their plans for the day. Some of the men were filling gopher holes on the main thoroughfare of the west range, and several would remain to make repairs on the bunkhouse roof that had leaked in the last rain some weeks back.

Laureli was excited. Today was the day that Court would return home. He and Jessie had been gone almost a week, and it had been the longest separation since their marriage. For the time being though, she was intrigued by the diggings of the Englishman and entered the stable to lead Belleza from her stall.

Suddenly, a very great sadness filled her. She remembered the chatterings of little Manuel as he had tried so hard to help her saddle the big, spirited mare. His thin little arms had not been strong enough to lift the saddle, but she always made a pretense of appreciating his help, without which the mare certainly could not be saddled. She missed Manuel—so much at times that she could not approach the stable without tears filling her eyes. She felt that emotion now, as she imagined the lovable little rascal darting playfully through the stables after his big pup. She still had not been able to control her emotions sufficiently to go into the small room where he had slept. She knew he kept a cache of little treasures beneath a loose board, and his sleeping mat would still be in the left-hand corner. The daguerreotype of Court's sister, whom the child had thought looked like his dead mother, still sat precariously on a narrow board. She had once watched the thin little boy fall asleep smiling at the picture. Laureli admired Court greatly for allowing the boy to keep that small treasure. It had meant so much to him.

As Laureli led Belleza out of the stable and prepared to mount, she tried to cast off the melancholy that had settled over her. It was a gloriously beautiful day, the skies clear and blue, with puffs of white clouds far, far across the forest, briefly touching the horizon as they floated gently to the south.

She wanted to see what Lord Wesley Rogers was up to this morning.

Unfortunately, she found him irate and irrational, verbally attacking her before she could alight her horse. "I simply will not have some pompous boy, Mrs. McKennon, coming out here to tell me to leave!" He continued with his excavations, refusing to give her so much as a brief look. "If you don't want me here, then you should simply tell me!"

Laureli shrugged her shoulders, confused. "I don't know what you're talking about. Lord Wesley. I told you that I don't mind your digging out here."

Only now did the little man look up, then scrutinize her over the top of his spectacles. "You did not send the boy out here?" he asked, a little skeptical.

"I certainly did not. And no one has the authority to make you leave except me. Tell me what this boy looked like and I will certainly talk to his parents about his trespassing on my property."

Lord Wesley flicked his wrist as he resumed his work. "A slim boy, about sixteen. Yd say... quite common looking. But the horse—" The antiquary looked up. "That was an animal not to be forgotten. A large white stallion. The boy was riding him bareback. It was like nothing I have ever seen."

Laureli gasped for air, her imagination threatening her equilibrium. She remembered Court spending the night at the line shack, and his description of an identical boy and horse. ''Did he say what his name was?"

“Sam... just Sam,” Lord Wesley replied a bit waspishly. “A nonsensical youth with nothing better to do than try to frighten people.”

Laureli approached, then bent to her knees to see the perfect skeletal outline of the horse. “Do you believe in ghosts, Lord Wesley?”

“Nonsense!” He did not halt his work. “Apparitions are for fools... not sensible men!”

“Well, I’m not a man,” Laureli replied quietly. “And I do believe in ghosts. The boy you saw last night—the boy named Sam—disappeared over twenty years ago. My family had thought he’d just moved on, but...” Laureli was feeling a little skeptical herself. Surely, some boy along the river was playing nocturnal pranks. But the horse could not be explained. The horse that she had seen—that many had seen—was not known along the river and had never been seen in the daylight hours. So deep in her thoughts, Laureli’s head snapped up when she heard the word, “foolish.”

“What did you say, Lord Wesley?”

“I said, Mrs. McKennon, that such beliefs are fanciful and foolish. If you have any idea who this boy is, I would suggest you warn him that another visit might result in a cracked head, and it won’t be mine.”

With the complete skeletal remains unearthed and lying just as they had lain three hundred years ago. Lord Wesley approached his tent and returned with a tripod and a rather cumbersome-looking rectangular black box. Laureli had never seen such a thing.

‘‘What is that?” she asked, rising to study the strange object.

‘‘It is, madame, a binocular stereoscopic camera, one of the finest of the day. Haven’t you ever had your picture taken?”

“Why... no,” she replied, “though I have heard that such a thing is possible.”

Lord Wesley busied himself setting up the camera and tripod, his subject obviously the skeletal remains of the horse and the sheet of canvas on which he had placed the eroded iron pieces found in the grave. “Then I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Mrs. McKennon,” he said. “For being so kind as to allow me to dig on your land, I will gladly take a picture of you and your family.”

Laureli was thrilled at the idea; the images of the three of them—no the four of them, because she had to include dear Pietra—recorded on paper for all time to come. “My husband will be home this evening from San Antonio. Do you think we might take the picture tomorrow?”

Lord Wesley’s thin lips widened into a smile. “I think that can be arranged, madame. After the encounter with that unpleasant lad last evening, I believe I could use that meal you so graciously offered me.”

“Tired of the dried beef?” she queried, linking her fingers at her back.

“God-awful tired of it!” he replied. “You just point me in the right direction, and I shall arrive at your homestead about four in the afternoon. The sun will be just perfect for the picture.”

Laureli pointed to the road down the hill. “Just follow the road until it forks off about a quarter mile upriver and take the left fork. It’ll bring you right to my home.” Laureli remounted Belleza. “I will see you then, Lord Wesley?”

‘‘Indeed you will, madame,” he replied absently, readying his bulky camera for the picture-taking process. “Indeed you will.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Lord Wesley Rogers had Providence to thank for the fact that his tent was pitched at an angle that could not be viewed from the road. Daylight had just ended when the heavily loaded supply wagon rumbled beside the Brazos, carrying two very weary men anxious to return to doting wives and families.

If Jessie had seen the excavations beside the line shack, the wagon would have gone no further along the road. Despite the fact that the land belonged to his sister, Mariah, and her husband, Jessie had kept trespassers off that particular spot for the past twenty-two years. He would have no objections to the unearthing of the European horse, but the tunnel that was Lord Wesley’s next undertaking would be made strictly off-limits by Laureli’s gentle uncle.

As it was, he and Court pulled into Wildwood in time for the evening meal. Laureli had been talking to Joe out at the stables, where a decision had been made to take two thousand head of cattle to Sedalia in the Kansas territory, which would be added to the herds of several other local ranchers to make the trip financially worthwhile. The Kansas Pacific livestock yards would be purchasing in excess of thirty thousand head of Texas cattle for transport to the East, and the head price was higher than it had ever been. Joe, as trail boss, wanted to take five of Wildwood’s men, in addition to six men provided by the other participating ranchers—three drags, two flanks, two swings, two pointers, a wrangler, and a rover—and begin driving the herd north on the Shawnee Trail by the end of the week. And if Laureli knew Joe and the men as well as she thought she did, within a week of delivering the autumn herd they would each have blown their hundred dollars in wages at the saloons in Kansas City to the west of Sedalia.

She and Joe had just finished plans for the drive when Court entered the stable. Laureli turned and walked right into his waiting arms, smiling her warmest smile for him.

“It is about time you returned,” she smiled, touching her lips to his in a gentle kiss. “Did you and Jessie stay out of trouble in San Antonio?”

Court raised an amused eyebrow as he held her small hands at his back. “Dear wife, when I departed, you did not give me orders to stay out of trouble. I assumed I had your permission.”

Laureli drew one of her hands from his back and lightly slapped his chest. “Oh, you do tease me. Court. If you got into trouble, it best not have been in the arms of another woman.”

Court laughed, turning her to his side so that they could move together toward

the house. “Do you mean to tell me that there are other women in the world? I really hadn’t noticed. Now... let’s go inside. I smell food.”

Jessie, getting a good whiff of Pietra’s evening meal, had already gone inside and had to wait while Court went upstairs to see his little son. Laureli was a bit miffed that Senora Ketti so readily allowed Court into the nursery when she often tried to bar Laureli’s entrance. Perhaps she felt her role as nanny threatened by the presence of the natural mother. Despite Pietra’s entreaties, Laureli was sure that the end result would be Senora Ketti’s dismissal as nanny.

Somehow, through the course of dinner and a sherry which the three of them enjoyed in the parlor afterward, the subject of Lord Wesley Rogers was slow in coming up. Certainly, his appearance had been an uncommon occurrence in Laureli’s life, but for the time being. Lord Wesley was as remote to her as Egypt. Both Court and Jessie had humorous tales of their own, which they had brought back from San Antonio.

“Oh, by the way,” Laureli said after the conversation began dwindling to silence, “Joe and I discussed driving part of the herd to Sedalia. The price per head is up and Joe thinks it’s a good time to sell. Some of the surrounding ranchers will participate and provide men for the drive.”

Court had been standing lazily beside the cold hearth when Laureli made the announcement. He turned, a little disappointed in her declaration, because they had agreed to discuss ranch matters before making decisions. He did not say anything, but Laureli saw the disappointment in his face. She knew Court well enough, though, to know that he would not make a scene in front of Jessie. Only when a very tense moment fell into the silence did Laureli decide to bring up a subject that had been troubling her for some time now.

“Jessie, do you happen to know of a boy along the river named Sam?”

Jessie choked on the mouthful of sherry he had been just about to swallow. “No...” he replied momentarily. “I seem to remember this coming up before.”

“Actually it did. Court saw him last year... didn’t you, Court?”

“I seem to recall that I did,” Court replied absently.

“It seems this mysterious boy has been trespassing at Wildwood again...” Laureli realized that she was baiting her Uncle Jessie, who had always doggedly refused to discuss the Sam he had known as a young man.

“He is about sixteen years old and he was riding a big white horse.”

‘‘I know of no such person.”

Laureli cut her gaze to the silent Court. “Do you know what I think, Jessie—” Because Court still had a disapproving line pressing upon his mouth, Laureli turned her look to the older man, “I believe this Sam who appeared to Court more than a year ago, and now to Lord Wesley, is the ghost of the Sam you

knew. I believe he met with foul play."

Jessie tried not to show that he was visibly startled by her declaration. He did not like discussing his tragic young friend of the past. He did not like it when Sam was brought up so innocently in conversation, which had been much too often in the past twenty years.

When Jessie made no reply. Court asked with mild consternation, "Who is this Lord Wesley you mentioned?"

Laureli relaxed lazily on the divan and dropped her head of loose, tousled hair back against the softness of a matching pillow. "Lord Wesley Rogers... an antiquary—" She laughed. "He's up on the hill by the line shack digging around. Do you know what he dug up?"

Years of suspicion were confirmed as Laureli watched her Uncle Jessie's face suddenly drain of color. She had felt for a long time that Jessie knew something —if not everything—of Sam's fate, but his reaction had never bred suspicion as it did now. She did not take her eyes from her uncle's suddenly trembling hands as Court asked, "All right, you've aroused our curiosity. What did this antiquary dig up on the hill?"

"Bones," she replied matter-of-factly. "The complete skeletal remains of a..." She deliberately paused, hoping to extract some verbal response from her uncle. But none seemed forthcoming. He merely sat there, trembling so visibly that one might have thought a winter gale had suddenly rushed in through the open foyer door. "A horse," she continued quietly. "A very large European horse. Lord Wesley believes it to be one that belonged to Cortez. He found the remnants of a Spanish bridle, a few bits of iron that would be unidentifiable to you and me. But Lord Wesley seems sure of what he has found.'' Laureli set her goblet on a side table and linked her fingers. ''I hope you don't mind but I gave him permission to dig up on the hill as long as he likes.''

Jessie shot up from his seated position. "Well, I don't like it, Laureli. And I don't believe your mother would like it. I don't want him digging up there."

Laureli continued to bait him. "If you have a logical objection. Uncle Jessie, I will be more than happy to consider it. He is really doing no harm, and all he has found is the remains of the horse. I personally have no objections to his digging on the hill. After all, Cortez is a very vital part of our history. If new information can be dredged up from the past, then I believe Lord Wesley should be given that opportunity."

"As long as he confines his digging to the grave of the horse—" Jessie said, drawing his trembling hands to his hips.

"Uncle Jessie—" Laureli cut a look at the thoughtfully frowning Court. "It is the only grave up there—isn't it?"

Jessie turned to her and smiled weakly. “Of—of course it is. Unless Cortez buried a whole fleet of horses.” Jessie moved toward the foyer, and upon reaching it slipped his hat on his head, drawing the brim down low on his forehead. He usually did not wear his hat indoors, but Laureli was sure she had seen tears in his eyes. “I’d best be getting home to Consuelo,” he said in departing.

Laureli sat for a long, quiet moment, staring absently at the floor. Her gaze lifted only when Court’s mellow voice replaced the silence. “What was that all about, Laureli?”

“I just believe that Uncle Jessie knows what happened to Sam.”

“This Sam... the same pompous boy I met last...”

“That boy,” Laureli relied seriously, “was a ghost. The ghost of a boy who died when I was little more than an infant. And the horse he was riding was a ghost, too.”

Court laughed. “And that’s nonsense, Laureli. That boy was as real as you and I.”

Laureli flushed furiously, a bit miffed that her husband chose to make fun of her beliefs. “You laugh now. Court McKennon—” He knew, by the way she spoke his name, that he had angered her. “I will make a wager that within a week Uncle Jessie will confess that he knows what happened to Sam. Especially now that the antiquary is digging on the hill. I believe that if he stays long enough, he will dig up other bones, and they’ll be twenty years old, not three hundred.” To change the subject, Laureli asked, “Did you find any information of Johnny Raines while you were in San Antonio?”

“He was there, but he hasn’t been seen in three weeks. I spoke to a man who knew him. From what I could glean from my talks with him, Raines has no idea that he killed Manuel. But that doesn’t matter to me. He’s a murderer, and I will see him hang.”

Laureli arose and approached him. Her arms wrapped around his slim waist. “You’re aware,” she replied quietly, “that if he returns to his cabin he’ll be lynched. The men at the bunkhouse—indeed, from throughout the county—have sworn to lynch him. They don’t care about the long arm of the law. Johnny Raines is a dead man if he returns to Brazoria.”

Court frowned, absently massaging her slim shoulders. “I don’t believe in men taking the law into their own hands. Johnny Raines killed Manuel, and I’d prefer to see him tried and hanged... not lynched by a mob. If that happens, I don’t want any of Wildwood’s men involved in it. Now—” Court smiled in a way that Laureli had grown to recognize. He was ready to retire to their bedchamber, bathe and relax with his wife. “Tomorrow we will talk about selling part of the

herd—which is something you did not first discuss with me. For now, I think you are as dusty as I am."

Laureli chuckled quietly. ‘‘Indeed, I spent the morning with another man," she replied. "Are you jealous?"

"Was he tall and handsome?"

"He's about four inches shorter than I am, rail thin, with a pinched little mouth and wire-rimmed spectacles. And—" Again, she laughed. "He wears pants cut off just below his knees."

"Then I'm not jealous. I assume your morning company was the infamous Lord Wesley Rogers who has Jessie in somewhat of an emotional dilemma?"

"He is." They reached the stairs and Laureli moved just ahead of him. "Lord Wesley is coming to dinner tomorrow evening and he has what he calls a—a—" What had he called that strange black box? Laureli thought for a minute, then came up with the information Lord Wesley had given her. "Oh, yes, a binocular stereoscopic camera. It takes an image and puts it on paper. He has offered to take our picture for posterity."

"Right now—" Court replied, squeezing her to him in a warm, but gentle embrace. "I am concerned with making posterity... upstairs. A daughter, perhaps, or another son?"

Jessie left his wagon sitting at the stable and rode one of the harness horses toward the southeast and the Brazos. His heart had almost been stilled by the thought of a stranger digging up on the hill by the line shack. He moved quickly over the rough terrain of a narrow strip of forest that cut a quarter mile off the trip to the shack. As he emerged from the woodline he saw the very faint glow of a lantern, and it was not coming from the Une cabin. He rode the heavy-hoofed mare up the hillside and dismounted by the small tent.

"Mister... hey, mister."

Immediately, Lord Wesley Rogers emerged from the tent, puffing on an elaborately carved wooden pipe. The smoke reflected in the lenses of his spectacles, creating a rather macabre image of the bone-thin antiquary. He was carrying the teak-wood cane with its brass tip, held close to his leg like a hidden weapon. "What do you want, sir?"

‘‘You can't dig up here. In the morning you have to leave."

Lord Wesley sniffed indelicately. ‘‘I told the boy last night that I will do as I bloody well please, and I tell you now, sir, that I have permission to dig here and I will not be run off by you, either."

Jessie remained adamant. ‘‘Mister, you will be off the hill in the morning."

"Do you own this land?"

"No... but my sister does. And she is in Europe on an extended holiday. I, sir,

am the male spokesman for my niece, Mrs. McKennon."

"Mrs. McKennon said I could dig here, and I will, sir."

Jessie felt anger welling within him, a feeling that had not affected him for many, many years. He could not remember the last time he had wanted to pounce and kill, as he now felt prompted to do. He cut his glance toward the rock formation that hid Sam's bones, and the full moon showed that the mound had not yet been disturbed.

"I will be up here in the morning, mister, to supervise your move."

"And you will find me digging," Lord Wesley quipped indignantly. "Mrs. McKennon gave me permission to take the bones of the big horse when I have concluded my excavations."

"You take the bones, sir, but you leave everything else alone."

Without warning the cane moved up from Lord Wesley's leg and lightly touched Jessie's chest. "I just wanted to be sure you weren't another of Mrs. McKennon's ghosts."

Jessie eased the cane away from his chest. "I'll be back up here at dawn, mister. You pack up your horse bones and be ready to move on."

Jessie did not listen to the barrage of oaths and insults that assailed the still night air. He mounted and coaxed the heavy mare down the hill.

He had just reached the trail when tears began to moisten his eyes. He felt a choking lump in his throat. "Damn it, Sam, what do you want of me?"

Instantly, a winterlike breeze rustled among the evergreens, enveloping Jessie within an icy grip that forced him off the horse and to the ground. Panic-stricken by the strange, unexplainable phenomenon, he used his well-worn boots to shift his body across the ground, until his back painfully hit the trunk of a pine tree.

He heard the heavy hooves of the harness mare as she disappeared on the trail toward the woodline. Jessie sat shivering against the tree trunk, so terrified he shook convulsively. It was a hot summer night, but he was freezing.

Then, he heard the approach of a horse and, without looking up, he was surprised that his mount had possessed the good sense to return to her rider. But when he looked up the approaching horse was white, illuminated against the darkness of night. And the rider—

Sam! Jessie closed his eyes tightly. "God! I thought you were dead, Sam-—" he muttered, afraid to open his eyes lest the apparition still he there. Perhaps he had fallen off his horse and hit his head. Perhaps he was unconscious and having a terrible nightmare. Perhaps this was not happening at all. But when Jessie forced .the terror into the hack of his mind and opened his eyes, the boy still sat there on the white horse. He was giving Jessie a strange look, and only then did Jessie realize that it was the Sam he remembered, right down to the faded brown boots

he had last seen tied to a bit of rotting rope in the grave up on the hill. ‘‘What do you want, Sam?” Even Jessie was surprised by the calmness that suddenly filled him.

“Peace,” Sam replied quietly, his voice whispering in the breeze. “You have condemned me to wander the earth, Jessie, and I have no right to be here.”

The small voice inside Jessie fought to convince him that he was, indeed, having a nightmare. He tried to accept it as such as he replied, ‘‘You were my friend, Sam. I wanted you to have the gold you were so greedy for. I thought for sure that you would have been pleased with heaven, and its roads paved with gold.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” the apparition replied quietly. “I have never left the hill. I’m ready now. And only you can help me.”

“Damn it, Sam! What can I do?”

Jessie looked up, watching a slow, mischievous grin widen the hauntingly blurred features of a boy who had been dead for twenty-two years. “Tell the family what I did. And bury me beside Miss Elsa... she was the only one who ever thought I had redeemable qualities. Then I will be happy.”

Miss Elsa. How casually that ghostly apparition mentioned the woman who had been Jessie’s mother—the same woman who had raised Mariah Palmer as her own child when, in fact, she had been the child of her dead sister, Claretta. Elsa Palmer had given the orphaned Sam a home at Little Wildwood, and Sam had never let a day pass when rebellion hadn’t stirred within him. He had made everyone’s lives miserable. And now, twenty-two years after his death, he was making Jessie miserable again. Jessie, too, was ready for peace of mind. “Very well, Sam... I’ll do as you ask.” Smiling his half-cocked but very sad smile, Sam turned the big horse into the misty darkness of the forest. And the biting cold went with him.

Laureli splashed the cool bath water over Court’s shoulders as he briskly rubbed himself with the lathered washcloth. He flicked his fingers at his chin, then puckered his mouth in a moment of discernment. ‘‘Blast it, I need to shave.”

Laureli’s fingers stroked his firm jawline. “Indeed you do,” she laughed. “You’ll not touch that scruffy face to mine until you have done so.” She rose to her feet and began collecting his shaving apparatus, returning to drop to her knees beside the tub where he relaxed almost lazily. His eyes were closed, but they crept open when she began brushing the cool lather over his face and throat.

“And suppose, my darling, that I wasn’t willing to wait until my face is clean-shaven?” he asked with all seriousness.

“I would flee into the corridor and scream for Pietra. I would tell her that you had taken leave of your senses and were mercilessly assaulting me.”

Court made a sudden move and took her arms. “I shall assault you, my Texas vixen... but you shall very much enjoy it.”

Laureli smiled, gently extracting her arms and opening the razor. She moved it toward his throat in an upward caress toward his chin. “All these tiny little whiskers,” she mused, “would be assault enough on my tender cheek.”

“And elsewhere—” he replied matter-of-factly.

“Elsewhere, indeed... you speak of me as though I’m a continent waiting to be explored.”

Court smiled at the comparison. “Actually, you are more than that. “You are my world, wife, and there will not be enough days and weeks and months to explore everything there is to know about you.” He moved to kiss her fingers, but she gently pinched his chin.

“I’ll cut you if you’re not careful, husband!” Momentarily, she completed shaving him and took the washcloth to remove the excess lather. “There, you’re beautiful again, and fit to lie beside me.” Laureli rose, wrapping the shaving implements in a small towel and placing them beside the ewer on the stand. “I shall open the windows so that a night breeze can come in. It’s stifling hot tonight.”

Not as hot as I feel right now. Court thought, rising, briskly drying off with the large towel Laureli had left on the chair beside him. He moved toward the bed, rubbing his face, then his damp hair. For a moment he stood at the washstand and combed back the long black locks of his hair, thinking that, perhaps, he was getting a little bushy looking around the ears.

“Do you think I should have Pietra trim my hair?” he mused, frowning at his reflection. But his own reflection could hardly hold his attention when, across his shoulders, he spied the lovely familiar form of Laureli dressed in a nightgown so sheer that she might as well not have been clothed at all. She was alluring, like an illusion in the darkness of their bedchamber, her auburn tresses falling down her back. When she met his gaze in the mirror, she whirled ever so gracefully.

“How do you like it? Tia and Consualo rode into Bolivar with Poppy several days ago. Consuelo brought it to me as a wedding gift. You know how our sweet, naive Consuelo is!”

“This,” Court said, touching the flowing fabric, “is hardly the gift of a naive woman. She knew bloody well what she was doing. She bought this for me, not you.”

Slowly, Court turned, his gray-black gaze narrowing as he gazed at the treasure of her beauty. He moved toward her, then took her hand and led her to the bed. Scarcely had she sat upon it before he was covering her body with his own,

caressing her hands and staring down into her powder-blue eyes. Always, there was a pool of love there, deep and wide, nurtured by the magnetic bond that existed between them. He still could not believe that she was his wife. He could never imagine growing tired and bored with her. She was like a new entity every day—a new person to get to know and love.

"You did not answer me," Laureli cooed, rubbing her nose against his own. "Do you like my nightdress?"

"I like it just fine," he replied, his warm hands caressing a path down her slim hips and thighs. "Especially when it eases up... like this..."

Laureli smiled sweetly. "You rascal... are you trying to seduce me? Why, sir, what kind of woman do you think I am?" she asked with feigned indignation, hoping that his masterful caresses would not cease. His prowess intoxicated her, and she felt herself growing light beneath his warm strokes. His freshly shaven chin grazed her cheek as he sought her mouth with lingering, loving, gentle, captivating kisses trailing across her summer-fresh skin.

The breeze wafted across their bodies and Court put a breath of space between them, his eyes twinkling as they met her sultry gaze. "That feels good... the breeze... your warmth... I thought I was tired after the long journey, but I am fully awake."

''Oh? Shall I fetch you a nice warm glass of milk to help you sleep?"

Court released a throaty chuckle. "Warm milk, indeed! You are all I need, little wife... and I want you without this... this mosquito net," he continued, dragging the filmy nightdress upward and lifting her tousled head so that he could rest it against the pillow. "There, is that not better?"

"It is wonderful," she whispered, feeling the hard length of him imprisoning her against the soft mattress.

For one brief moment Court eased himself from her, repositioning himself on the pillow and coaxing her up to him. He kicked the bedcoverings out of the way; it was much too warm a night to be restricted by the heavy material that served nothing but decorative purposes. He wanted only to lie in naked abandon and feel the blood surging through his body as Laureli rested against him. He wanted only to touch her, to arouse the splendid rapture of her that only he had enjoyed.

Laureli scooted up into his arm and felt his hand move to her back beneath the thick masses of her hair. She loved these moments of togetherness, of solitude, of knowing that the flippant Senora Ketti would take care of their child and keep him quiet. She loved the illusion that she and Court were the only two people in the world and that nothing could ever separate them. And at the moment she felt wanton, willing him into her arms for the wonderful and gratifying togetherness

that she had waited a week to enjoy once again. She loved the way the twin mounds of her breasts branded his firmly muscled chest.

Moving ever so slightly, Laureli eased her mouth toward his and touched it warmly in a kiss. ‘‘I missed you,” she whispered. “It was such a long, long week with you away.”

“You missed me?” he replied with a yawn. “Little wife, I am exhausted. I suppose we should catch a little sleep before the dawn creeps upon us.”

Laureli gave him a wide-eyed look that instantly elicited an almost imperceptible smile. “Tired! You’re not tired now, are you?”

“Well, I suppose,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders absently. “Isn’t sleep what beds are made for?”

“Not just sleep,” she replied, molding her body against his side, then easing her knee across his legs. “There are other activities that such a soft, warm place could nurture.”

“Such as?” He was trying to fluster her, and from the color rising in her cheeks, he was doing it quite successfully. Then he allowed the straight line of his mouth to widen into a smile, even as he eased her to her back and half covered her body with his own. “Fooled you, eh, little wife? Don’t you know how much I want you? Don’t you know when I ache for you?”

His mouth imprisoned hers, gentle, loving, whispering upon her passion-sensitive flesh as he trailed brief, tantalizing kisses down the slim column of her neck, nipping playfully at the hollow that pulsed in her neck. His masterful hands teased at her flesh, causing it to tingle beneath his caress. How warm and passionate she was! How gentle in her movements, like a fawn hidden by its overprotective mother. Her exquisite crystal eyes narrowed as they darted lovingly over his firm features, inviting his caresses.

The warmth moved like a wild flood through her slender body, becoming hotter and hotter still, until she felt that their flesh was melting together—such reckless abandon, such tantalizing, lingering surcease as his body oh, so gently fused to hers, eliciting a kittenish little moan that he absorbed into his mouth as he kissed her, as his hands buried themselves in the masses of her hair.

Every time they were together. Court experienced new and exciting adventures, the way she lifted her slender legs, or wrapped one around him as he moved ever so gently inside her; the way she flung her head, then instantly offered her mouth for his caress; the artful movements of her tongue trailing across his ample mouth, and the playful, teasing little nips as their cheeks lay gently against each other’s. Her hands trailed along his taut, masculine body, over his slim hips that had intensified their pace, matching her movements; the rhythm of her body that was like a wild symphonic orchestra gaining in clarity as their mutual

gratification began to peak.

Laureli felt the moistness of his skin beneath her fingers, felt the rough, demanding movements of his groin, and her own total surrender. How vibrantly alive she felt, how wondrously enraptured by his expert caresses. She wanted only for the magic never to end, for their bodies to float, suffused, among the ethereal wonders of the universe. But as a tide burst inside her, eliciting a delicate gasp, they soon lay together in gentle rapture, held together by the sweet fulfillment that had enveloped their entwined bodies.

Throughout the night, Laureli rested in his arms, catching scarcely more than a moment of sleep herself as she marveled at the perfect virility of his profile, his ample mouth that had imprisoned hers, the almost violet shadow of his eyelids. She marveled at the strength he betrayed even in his deep sleep, as he held her to him and rested his chin against her tousled hair.

The breeze whipped through the thin under-draperies, cooling the room, whispering across their joined bodies and the light sheet she had pulled over them.

Laureli was so excited to be in his arms after the week of separation that sleep was long in coming. She was content to simply lie there and be thankful for the treasure of him.

He had given up every aspect of his past to be with her.

That, alone, spoke eloquently of his love for her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The following morning one of Poppy's Mexican vaqueros rode over to Wildwood in search of Jessie. The flamboyant, fantastically skillful horseman sat astride the mustang, who was a descendant of the Spanish Arabian steeds, and called across the veranda, ‘‘Senor... Senor McKennon," then lightly wrapped the reins around the horn of his saddle and waited.

Presently, Court, bare to the waist, walked out to the veranda and greeted the vaquero, known by most of the men as Anglo because of his light skin. "What can I do for you, Anglo?"

Anglo tipped his wool felt hat lined with silk, then wrapped his fingers around the chin strap. ‘‘Senor Consuelo is concerned that Jessie did not return to Little Wildwood last evening."

Court's dark brows gathered in a frown. "What do you mean, he didn't return? He left here about eight last night."

"He did not return, Senor McKennon." Behind Court, Laureli moved toward the veranda, looping the ties of her satin robe. She and Court had both been in bed when Anglo had ridden up to the veranda.

"What is the problem, Court?"

“It’s your Uncle Jessie... he didn’t return to Little Wildwood last evening.” At that precise moment. Court spied the still loaded wagon half protruding from the stable entrance, and the harness mare grazing near the woodline. “Something is wrong, Laureli,” Court said, directing his next statement to the vaquero. ‘‘Give me a minute. I have an idea where he might be.”

“I hope so,” Anglo replied. “Senora Consuelo is cackling like a hen buried wattle-deep in the earth. I shall saddle a horse for you.”

Laureli followed Court to their bedchamber. “Do you think he rode out to the hill last night?” she questioned.

“I know he did,” Court replied somberly. “You certainly upset him with your tales of ghosts and the Englishman digging for bones up there. I just hope he hasn’t gotten himself in trouble.”

“Oh, dear...” Laureli began to wring her hands, her pale-blue eyes dominating her face with shame as she recalled how callously she had baited her uncle. “If something has happened to him, I will never forgive myself.”

Court’s disapproving look held her for a long, silent moment as he buttoned his shirt. “I don’t know why you can’t simply let the past die. Why must you and the family keep bringing up something that is obviously very painful to Jessie Palmer? I love you, Laureli,” Court continued, briefly caressing her shoulders through the silk fabric of her robe, “but you can be a little wicked sometimes.”

Laureli shrugged delicately. “I was terribly insensitive, wasn’t I? Do you think I should apologize to him?”

“I certainly do,” he replied, firmly squeezing her arms as he prepared to depart. “And I would like your promise—” He paused when he reached the door. “That you will never dredge up any more speculations on what happened to that blasted Sam.”

“I promise,” she replied, remaining in the bedchamber, listening to the sound of his retreating bootsteps and wishing she hadn’t been so insensitive last evening. She did not like the idea of Court being annoyed with her.

Half an hour later. Court and Anglo reached the tent where Lord Wesley Rogers was in temporary residence. They found the peculiar little Englishman arranging the bones of the horse on a large piece of canvas.

Court had managed only to say, “Have you seen—” when Lord Wesley quipped annoyingly, “He’s in the cabin.”

Just at that moment, Jessie emerged from the cabin, holding his hand to his head. “God, I have a headache,” he mumbled, shielding his eyes from the bright morning sun. “Court... Anglo, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Court replied, dismounting. “Consuelo was worried when you didn’t come home. Why’d you stay up here?”

Jessie had a most befuddled look on his face. “Hell if I know.”

Lord Wesley, his mouth pinched with annoyance, only now left the site where he was working. “This barbarian rode up the hill last night and ordered me to leave. The next thing I knew he was sitting against a tree trunk down the hill talking to his blasted self. He was dazed and disoriented, so I put him to rest in the cabin. You may now—” Lord Wesley removed his spectacles and cleaned them with his handkerchief. “Take the fellow with you.”

“I’ve got things to do up here,” Jessie muttered, shaking the grogginess from his head. “And I need to be alone to do it.”

Lord Wesley started to protest, but Court instantly cut him off. “My wife informs me that you will dine with us this evening, sir. May I extend an early invitation, and can you accompany me back to our home this morning?”

Lord Wesley gave Court a skeptical look, one that instantly cut to Jessie Palmer. “Will you disturb the remains of my horse?” the Englishman asked Jessie.

“I will not touch it,” he replied.

Lord Wesley turned his gaze to the tall, dark-haired man. “Let me get my packhorse, sir, and my camera equipment. I will then leave this fellow to do whatever it is he has to do.”

The vaquero asked, “Senor Palmer, do you wish that I stay to help you?”

Jessie shook his head. “No, Anglo, what I have to do must be done alone. But I’d appreciate you bringing me a horse in about three or four hours.”

“Si, Senor Jessie.”

He was being mysterious! Court wondered if, perhaps, Laureli was right to assume that Jessie knew something about the fate of the boy named Sam of long ago. He also wondered if Jessie should be left alone in this strange state, and what he had to do on the hill that had to be done in such secrecy. If Laureli’s suspicions were correct, and the remains of the boy named Sam were, indeed, on the hill somewhere, then had Jessie been responsible for his death? If he hadn’t, then why the secrecy?

The question revolved through his head, even as the very reluctant Lord Wesley accompanied Court and Anglo down the hill toward Wildwood. Court looked back at the dark form of Jessie Palmer standing on the hill. He tried not to be curious, but it was like asking the sun not to shine.

Jessie stood on the hill until the three mounted men disappeared into the shadows of the forest. He remembered very little of last night and was still trembling inside from the very vivid nightmare he had suffered when he’d allowed the clumsy packhorse to throw him. He knew only that he could not face any more years ahead, and any more family speculations on the fate of the

wayward Sam who had killed himself trying to recover the gold of Cortez. It was time to bury the past, so to speak, and the very vivid nightmare had given him the solution to his problems.

Being that it was Sunday, he knew he would not be disturbed. The men would be lounging about the bunkhouse throughout the day and would probably send only a lone rider to check on the herd sometime in the afternoon. So Jessie began moving about quietly, first prying the small grain bin loose from the side of the line shack and lining the interior with the muslin curtains that he took from one of the windows. He borrowed Lord Wesley's pick and ax, and after removing the stones he had placed over the hole last Christmas, began digging into the mouth of the tunnel.

Over the course of the next hour he removed several recognizable items from the hole: Sam's corroded pocket watch, the large gold ring that Jessie himself had brought up from the river twenty-five years before, bits of hemp that had once been rope and, finally, the leather remnants of a pair of long-buried boots.

Misty-eyed, Jessie then began removing the bones of his young friend from the hole, surprised that they had not worked down into the tunnel over the course of the years. Gently he lay the human remains in the muslin-lined grain bin, and as he reached the skull, he realized why the bones had not fallen into the cavern a hundred yards below the surface. Sam's skull had been wedged, and it took Jessie half an hour to release it from the tight sides of the tunnel. Nothing could have gotten past it but the dirt Jessie had thrown in the hole each Christmas Day.

With all that was left of Sam resting in a broken heap in the small bin, Jessie scouted around the cabin for a piece of lumber, using his bowie knife and Lord Wesley's ax handle to form it into a lid for the bin. He had just nailed the lid in place when Anglo emerged from the woodline, leading one of Little Wildwood's horses.

"Senor Jessie, have I returned too soon?" Anglo asked. "What is that you have there?"

"It's nothing... just a few things from the cabin that need to be returned to Little Wildwood. Thanks for bringing the horse." Jessie spent a few minutes tying the small wooden box behind his saddle. "You go on back to the house and tell Senora Consuelo that I want all the family brought together this evening."

"Everyone, Senor Jessie?"

"Everyone, Anglo... Poppy, Tia, Consuelo, Laureli, my children... everyone. And, Anglo—"

The burly Mexican who had turned his small horse to descend the hill, now turned back. "Anglo, when you return to Little Wildwood, will you dig a grave... beside the grave of my mother, Elsa. No one need know about it but you and

me,”

“We will have a funeral for the little box you have there?” Anglo asked, his light-skinned face suddenly frowning. The senor he worked for was being very mysterious, indeed.

“Yes,” Jessie replied. When the very confused Anglo was out of hearing range he added, “About twenty-four years late.”

At midday, Laureli received word from one of the vaqueros that Jessie wanted to see all of the family that evening at Little Wildwood. She consulted with Court, then sent a reply back that they would attend. She then advised Pietra that she and Court would be away for the evening, and to see that Lord Wesley Rogers was comfortable and well fed.

For now, she sat in the parlor listening to the many adventures of the slim English antiquary. A few swigs of brandy beneath his thin beltline had drawn out more words in the past hour than he had spoken in three days. He was quite interesting, his travels having taken him from Egypt and Tibet, to the tip of South America and up through the jungles where he had investigated ancient Aztec and Mayan ruins. For the past year he had been following the trail of Cortez up from Mexico and had chosen the northeastern route of Cortez’s rebellious soldiers, rather than following the northwestern course that Cortez himself had taken. Antiquaries before him had followed the northwestern route. Lord Wesley Rogers was hoping to make new discoveries, and possibly uncover the legendary treasure that Cortez had stolen from the Mexican and South American jungles. It had not been discovered on his western route.

“Wouldn’t it be exciting,” Laureli exclaimed, “if the treasure of Cortez lay on the hill you are excavating?”

Lord Wesley nodded his head as he puffed deeply on his pipe. “Exciting, indeed, but highly improbable. With that bull-headed hooligan up on the hill, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if the remains of my horse aren’t spirited away.”

Laureli stifled a humorous smile. “I wouldn’t talk that way about my Uncle Jessie, Lord Wesley. He really is a dear soul, just a little eccentric.”

“Indeed, madame,” Lord Wesley replied, raising his goblet. “I will readily drink to that astute observation.”

They would have sat in lazy leisure throughout the afternoon if Jan Walters had not returned from Brazoria where he had picked up the mail the day before. Laureli found a letter from her mother among the mercantile, feed and warehouse bills and a very warm letter from Court’s parents welcoming her into the family.

“Jan, why don’t you take Lord Wesley out and show him the new horses we’ve gotten in. He might want to consider trading in his worn-out old packhorse.”

Lord Wesley took the cue and stood, giving her a slight bow. “That, madame, sounds like a very good idea to me. Tm not sure the Mexican burro will last too many more miles.”

Laureli smiled, amused that he would think the small horse was a burro. “I’m sure we can make a deal. Lord Wesley, if you find a pack animal you like.” She walked Jan and Lord Wesley to the door and quickly returned to the parlor. Court was just beginning to open the letter from his parents when she politely took it from him. “I believe this is addressed to Mrs. Court McKennon?” He readily relinquished the letter, but she sat it aside and started to open the letter from her own parents. Court, however, took the letter from her and handed Lord McKennon’s letter back to her.

“Please... will you read this one first? I’d like to know what my father has to say to his new daughter-in-law.”

“Oh... very well—” She quickly opened the letter. She had scarcely read more than a few words before she was surprised by the fact that Court’s parents had met Matthew and Mariah Cade at the October ball at Chatsworth.

“That cannot be,” Court argued, snatching his parents’ letter from her to read it himself. “I was at that ball myself. My parents were there, my sister... How could it be that I never met your parents? Being that I announced my marriage to you, and announced your name to all in attendance, it surely seems that your parents would have come forth.”

Laureli mused over his statement for a moment. “Are you saying that you did, in fact, announce our engagement at a ball being attended by the queen?”

“Did I say anything about the queen?” he asked, arching a dark eyebrow.

She did not reply to his question as she smiled impishly. “Now that we’ve read the letter from your parents, perhaps we could read the one from mine?” she offered.

Court looked a little sheepish. He had, after all, insisted that they read his father’s letter first, when she had been so excited about receiving correspondence from her own parents as well. Laureli opened her mother’s letter, her eyes briefly scanning the few lines of the first page, then she looked up at Court. “Shall I read it to you.?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

My dearest Laureli, it began. Imagine my surprise when Lady Delilah of Chatsworth House where we were staying in Derbyshire informed me that quite a nice young man had announced to all of England just moments before that he was going to marry our daughter. I thought, surely, that the name had to be a coincidence until I spoke to the young gentleman’s very aristocratic family. Then, my darling, I received your letter informing us of your marriage. I cannot

tell you how happy I am for you, and how happy you have made us with the news of our darling grandson. Father and I are so anxious to see you again, and to meet this young man that fate kept us from meeting that cool October afternoon in Derbyshire. After meeting your husband's parents, we know that you have snatched a pretty good man for yourself. We have always held high aspirations for you.

"Pretty good man, indeed," Court mused, fighting the hint of a smile. "I believe you got a damned good man!"

He flipped his wrist almost carelessly. "Go on, read the rest."

As dearly as we wish to return to Texas—" Laureli turned the page. "We cannot just yet. We have traced Poppy's family to Northampton and have heen staying at a rented manor near there. Tell your Poppy, my dear father, that when I return to Texas, there will be no family secrets. In the three years that we have been away, we have traced the family on both mother's and father's side back to the fourteenth century. It is something I have always wanted to do, and your father has graciously indulged my preoccupation with family. I hope you will understand that it will be a while before we return to Wildwood.

Just remember that we love and miss you very much. Our fondest wishes to your new husband and our wonderful little grandson.

Fondly and always Mother and Dad

"Isn't that the darndest thing?" Court said, opening his arms to Laureli. "I may have passed within mere inches of your parents and not even known it. I should have seen a family resemblance in two of those faces in the crowd. But—" He shrugged, smiling as he did so. "Alas, I did not."

Laureli held him tenderly for a long, long moment, then put the letter on the small table along with the one from Court's father. "I feel so happy right now. Court. I truly believe that we have always meant to be together. Fate drew our parents together in friendship, and us together in love. Surely, it was meant to be."

At that moment, Pietra entered the parlor. "Have I interrupted you?" she asked, tucking a disheveled strand of her graying hair beneath the scarf she was wearing. "Have you decided what you wish to have prepared for the visiting Englisher?"

"It's Englishman," Court interrupted, loathing the way the Texans insisted on using the word Englisher.

"Suppose it is a woman?" Pietra quipped in her flippant way. "Is it still Englishman?"

Court couldn't help but smile. He could not remain angry with the aging Pietra. "If it is a woman, it is English woman," he replied patiently. "Now..." Court

patted Laureli's hand. "I'll go out and entertain this Lord Wesley Rogers, while you two decide what to prepare for the evening meal."

"Don't forget that Lord Wesley will take our picture," Laureli reminded him. "We'll all want to freshen up a bit."

"I won't forget," Court replied, unable to reflect the excitement that Laureli felt at having their picture taken. He always felt so stifled and foolish posing for portraits. He imagined that posing for a photograph would be no less uncomfortable.

Court had just begun moving toward the corral where Jan Walters stood with the staid Englishman when Anglo rode his big, muscular horse toward them. "Senor... Senor McKennon—" he half yelled, dismounting from the animal before it had halted. "The hill... the hill up on the Brazos where the line shack sits... it is rumbling... rocks are falling... trees are being uprooted."

"Damn it to hell!" Lord Wesley shouted. "That bumbling fool has dynamited the hill."

"No... not dynamite," Anglo argued. "The hill is just rumbling." The greatest magnitude of fear filled the gaudily dressed vaquero. He had been living in Concepcion, Chile in February of 1835 when a destructive earthquake had struck.

Court jumped immediately into action. "Jan, get a couple of the boys out of the bunkhouse to saddle up some horses. We'll ride out and see what's going on." He was deeply concerned. The river had risen several feet in the past few weeks due to heavy rains. If, as many along the Brazos believed, caverns existed beneath the hills that formed a natural levee for the river, then it was possible that the earth could collapse in places. It just seemed ironic that it should happen at the time that Jessie was upset over Lord Wesley's occupation on the hill. He hoped that he had not used dynamite, although Anglo adamantly said that he hadn't.

Court moved quickly to the house and told Laureli what was happening, giving her indisputable orders to stay at Wildwood. He then rode out to the hill with Jan and Lord Wesley.

The rumbling was isolated to the hill, and some shifting of the earth had taken place. Lord Wesley immediately dismounted from the small mustang and rushed up the hill, where he began hastily dismantling his tent and gathering his instruments together.

The vaquero refused to mount the hill, but Court dismounted his own horse so that he could assist the Englishman. Lord Wesley was just putting the last of the bones of the big horse in his canvas sack when the hill let out a mighty rumble, sending billows of dust emitting from the hole where Jessie had removed Sam's

body just that morning.

"Forget that," Court yelled, grabbing the Englishman by the sleeve of his shirt and forcing him off the hill. Both men dove belly-down onto the trail beside the horses when the hill gave way, taking with it the skeletal remains of the horse. Lord Wesley's packed instruments, and the

Anglo fought to restrain control of the horses, but Court's panic-stricken mare broke the reins and hightailed it for Wildwood. By the time the rumbling ceased some minutes later and the dust began to drift off into the summer breeze, the hill was a devastated ruins. Everything had been swallowed up by the earth.

Lord Wesley released a torrent of oaths such as Court hadn't heard since his days on the Southampton docks. Lord Wesley sat on his buttocks, angrily flicking the dust from his clothing as Court climbed to his feet. "Just be glad, sir, that you got off the hill with your life."

"But my instruments... my tent... my bones—" the Englishman whimpered, his life's work ripped from beneath him in the few moments that it had taken the hill to sink. "That barbarian fool did this!"

Court had no time to respond, or to defend Jessie against Lord Wesley's accusations of sabotage. Behind them, the current of the Brazos suddenly increased in intensity, and a great wave of water exploded from the bank. Court remembered the family telling stories of Jessie washing up in a cavern beneath the waterline of the river. Perhaps there had been something to that story after all. And if, indeed, there had been a cavern of gold, it was now buried beneath tons of earth and rock, lost to human hands—and greed—forever.

Except for changing the topography of the immediate region, the sinking of the hill had accomplished nothing more destructive than the loss of the line shack and Lord Wesley's possessions. Over the next hour, as the earth continued to settle, homesteaders, responding to the thunderous noise that had rocked the region, began gathering round the hill. Lord Wesley tried in vain to find the remains of his ancient horse but it, too, was buried beneath tons of earth. The handles of his pick and shovel were broken, the only hint of human occupancy emerging from the broken, rocky earth; the only remaining items of equipment that Lord Wesley had packed all over the world on his long journey through history.

Rollo Traylor, who had been drinking heavily, as usual, sauntered up to Court and asked, ‘‘You been dynamitin' the hill, McKennon?"

It was almost an accusation, and Court didn't like it. "There are homesteaders up and down the other side of the river," Court replied patiently. "I would not endanger the lives of innocent people by using dynamite. Of course, I didn't. The hill merely collapsed."

Rollo Traylor spat a wad of tobacco a dozen feet away, almost hitting the boots of the immaculately dressed vaquero. ‘‘I been hearin’ that you had somebody diggin’ up here... some Englisher—”

There was that loathsome word again! Court gritted his teeth. “Excavating the bones of a horse two feet below the surface would hardly cause a hill to collapse,” Court replied indulgently. “The river probably washed up beneath the shoreline. This was bound to happen sooner or later.”

Rollo Traylor shrugged, willing to accept Court’s theory simply because the damage had not been done to his own property. Since the excitement was over, Rollo turned to mount his horse. “Oh, by the way, McKennon—”

Court looked up at the broad expanse of the whiskey-guzzling rancher. When Rollo hesitated. Court said a bit sharply, “Out with it, man.”

“Don’t get so damned huffy, mister. My boys say Johnny Raines has been seen in the area. I hear you been lookin’ for him. That live thousand dollar reward... can I collect it if I deliver ol’ Johnny to you?”

“Have your boys told him why I’m looking for him?” Court asked.

“Sure... ‘cause he killed the little Mex.”

Court loathed bigotry and racial slurs. “His name was Manuel,” he responded between tightly gritted teeth.

“Whatever you say, McKennon. I’ll keep my eye out for Johnny. I could sure use that money.”

“You give me Johnny Raines... all in one piece, and you’ll collect the reward.”

Rollo laughed, a stream of tobacco juice immediately trickling down his chin. “What you want him all in one piece for? All you’re goin’ to do is hang ‘im dead!” Rollo Traylor spurred his horse southward on the trail.

Just at that moment, Laureli rode up on Belleza to survey the damage. Court offered his assistance in dismounting and when she was close to him she asked, “You don’t think Jessie was responsible for this, do you, Court?”

“I told Lord Wesley no, but I’m not so sure. If he set a dynamite charge low enough in the ground, it could have collapsed the hill. Frankly, Laureli, I’m anxious to hear what your uncle has to say this evening. I don’t know what the hell happened over twenty years ago, but it’s time for the mystery to end. He was real upset this morning and he wanted to be on the hill alone.”

“To set the dynamite charge?”

Court shrugged absently, looking about to make certain that no one was close enough to overhear. “I don’t know. But if I ask him point-blank, I believe he will tell me the truth.”

“He will,” Laureli assured him. “Uncle Jessie has never told a lie... and I don’t suspect he ever will. He may have kept secrets, and I believe he knows what

happened to Sam, but rather than lie. Uncle Jessie has always evaded answering. If he set a charge, I believe he'll admit it."

"But why... for God's sake, would he?"

Laureli moved beneath the powerful warmth of his arm. "I believe we'll find out this evening," she replied.

Lord Wesley was still mumbling beneath his breath, making accusations that no one could comprehend and searching the collapsed hill for some of his equipment. Laureli approached, hoping that she could find some words to comfort him. ''Lord Wesley?"

He looked up, unable to smile when he met her own smiling face. "Yes, what is it, madame."

"I just thought I'd remind you that your camera was saved."

Straightening his thin frame. Lord Wesley managed a very weak smile. "So it was, madame... so it was. I now have a pick and a shovel without handles, and my camera equipment. But I lost the remains of my horse, and anything else that may have lain beneath the hill."

"Thank God you weren't up here when the hill collapsed," she reminded him.

Lord Wesley shrugged his narrow shoulders. He thought to himself. If I had been, that bumbling fool wouldn't have had a chance to set a charge. He instead replied, "I guess I should be thankful for that."

Laureli moved back to Court, who was talking to one of the homesteaders from the east side of the river. She greeted the gentleman she had met briefly just a few moments ago, then excused herself by announcing, "I must return to the house and assist Pietra in preparing for the meal. Make sure Lord Wesley returns. Court. He's terribly upset over the loss of his equipment."

"And his horse," Court replied, cutting his eyes to the little man who continued to search through the rubble.

Anglo stepped forward. "Shall I accompany the senora back to Wildwood?" he offered.

Laureli gave him a warm smile as she mounted the spirited mare. "I'll be all right, Anglo."

Unexpectedly, Court's hand moved to the back of Laureli's neck. He coaxed her face down and kissed her. It was a rare display of affection in front of other people, and it pleased her that he was losing a bit of the British pomposity. Then she turned Belleza on the northern trail and coaxed her into a lope.

It had been quite a day. Jessie had created a stir in the hill that morning, had called the family for a meeting that night, and now the hill had collapsed, taking the line shack with it into the bowels of the earth. If the legendary gold was there —and Laureli was sure that Jessie was the only one who knew for certain

whether it was or not—it would never again be violated by human hands. But it was somehow a comforting thought. If, indeed, the gold was where Jessie had claimed it to be so many years before, it seemed only fitting that it should remain where it had been hidden. Treasures bred greed, and there was enough of that along the Brazos as it was. Johnny Raines had been a prime example of that.

So deep in her thoughts, she was not alerted to the possibility of danger until Belleza almost unseated her by darting off the trail. As she calmed the mare, she realized that someone sat atop a horse in the shadows of the woodline beside the trail, with a dark hat partially hiding his face.

Only now did alarm course through her, forcing her slim body to become almost rigid in the saddle. Still, a sense of pride forced her to hold her head up high and the mare in place on the trail. “Who is there?” she questioned. The dark-clothed man eased his horse from the shadows of the forest. She recognized him only when he used his middle finger to flick the brim of his hat from his forehead. She had seen that move too many times to forget it. “Johnny Raines!” She was almost beyond anger, unable to feel the threat that his mere presence elicited. “What are you doing back here?”

“I left some things at my cabin that I want to collect,” he replied sarcastically. “But if I go back by myself Tm liable to find myself swinging from the end of a rope.” Slowly, his large handgun came up from its holster on his right hip. She made a move as though to spur her horse into a run, but Johnny aimed the gun at the big mare’s head. “I know you don’t mind taking chances with your own life, but if you move. Miss Laureli—Mrs. McKennon—” he quickly amended, “I’ll shoot that fancy horse right out from under you. Now—” The gun wavered at her. “You ride ahead of me toward my cabin. And I swear, if you utter so much as a whimper, I’ll shoot you and your horse dead.”

Laureli’s mouth pressed rebelliously. “You have no cause to threaten me, Johnny Raines. You got yourself into trouble. You’re the one who had two wives when I agreed to marry you. You’re the one who killed the little boy—”

“I was aimin’ for your blasted new husband!” he shot back. “I didn’t mean to kill the boy! You should have been my wife! Not his!”

“You already had two wives!” she shot back. The thunder in his eyes was a clear indication that he would not listen to reason. “But he was—is the man I love, Johnny. I never loved you. I thought you knew that.”

Johnny lifted the large firearm, until the barrel of it was aimed at Laureli’s head. “I didn’t figure on you lovin’ me. Miss Cade! I just wanted to make your life miserable, and the life of that bastard brat, too! An’ I can still get revenge... because I won’t let you go. Miss Cade, until I’ve made you my woman!”

“And I will die first,” she replied quietly, trying not to rile him more than he

already was.

"As you wish, missy. Now... you git—" He waved the gun in the direction of the trail. "After I pick up my hidden cache, I've got a real good place for us to hide," Laureli moved ahead of him on the trail, her heart heating furiously, her eyes darting to the woodline in hopes that an escape route would suddenly spring forth. The only salvation that she did not pray for was the appearance of Court. She knew that, without a doubt, Johnny Raines would kill him, just for the sake of it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When Court eventually returned to Wildwood, he assumed that Laureli had journeyed over to the small ranch to the northwest, ahead of him. Because he had spent all day with Lord Wesley out on the hill, or what was left of it, he did not have time to grab a light supper or visit his son in the nursery. He had offered Lord Wesley Rogers the accommodations of Wildwood while he insisted on searching the remains of the hill, and the Englishman was now out at the kitchen enjoying the meal that Pietra had prepared.

Court quickly cleaned off at the washstand, brushed back his dark hair and changed his shirt. Anglo, who had also stayed on the hill with them, waited outside to accompany him to Little Wildwood.

It had turned out to be quite a Sunday, normally a day of rest and relaxation at the large ranch of the Brazos.

The family had gathered at Little Wildwood by the time Court and Anglo rode in and dismounted amid the several wagons and other saddled horses. Jessie had certainly drawn all the family together, because his and Consuelo's grandchildren played throughout the grounds. In every tree a small face peered out, or from the cover of a grain bin or corral fence. Court had never seen so much activity in one place.

Little Wildwood had changed very little in the past thirty years. It had once been the home of Laureli's mother, but after she had married Matthew Cade they had moved to the more elegant ranch owned by Francisco Gomez, leaving the smaller ranch to Poppy, Tia, and their heirs.

Suddenly, it occurred to Court that Belleza was not among the other saddled horses. A frown of concern drew his eyebrows together. Then he called to one of the young boys, "Have you seen Miss Laureli, young man?"

Pavina's oldest son replied, "No, senor... she has not arrived yet."

Court felt apprehension tighten in his chest. He had assumed Laureli had ridden on ahead of him, and could not imagine where she might have stopped off, or why. Quickly, he moved into the house where the adults were gathering. Spying Poppy, he motioned for him to join him in the foyer.

“What is it, Court?” Poppy asked.

“Laureli... I’m concerned about Laureli.”

“Didn’t she ride over with you and Anglo?”

“No... she left the hill hours ago. I thought she would be here when I arrived.”

The same degree of apprehension twisted inside Poppy. “I’ll get Jessie and some of the other men. We’ll see if we can’t track her down.”

Poppy informed Tia and Consuelo that Laureli was not here as expected, then began gathering all the men and boys who could ride. Pavina and Merita, Jessie’s two oldest daughters, also joined them in the search.

They spanned out over the miles of trails covering the two ranches, agreeing to meet back at Little Wildwood if Laureli had not been found by nightfall. Court returned to Wildwood and learned from both Pietra and Senora Ketti that Laureli had not returned from the hill that morning.

A devastating fear flooded through Court’s veins. He had a deep, foreboding feeling that Laureli was not simply off enjoying the late summer night.

Laureli had never been so frightened in all her life. Johnny Raines had kept the large gun aimed at her on the ride over to his cabin, where he had taken a leather pouch from beneath a loose board. He didn’t betray the contents of the pouch, but she suspected that it was the cache of money he had claimed earlier to be retrieving. Johnny was too fearful for his life to keep Laureli at his own cabin, so he had forced her back onto her horse and they were now well hidden in the overgrown cabin where Wynn Garrett had died; the same cabin that Johnny’s father had lived in before marrying her Aunt Consuelo.

Johnny was being unnecessarily brutal. Her upper arm ached where he had so firmly held her as he’d forced her into the darkened interior of the cabin. He shoved her to a corner and then began searching about for the oil lamp and matches. He did not worry about being discovered. He had even brought the horses through the underbrush, and they were tied in a far corner of the cabin. He had used a tumbleweed to rub out any evidence of their tracks.

“What do you hope to accomplish by kidnapping me, Johnny?” she asked defiantly.

“Accomplish,” he chuckled hoarsely. “Why Miss Laureli, the only thing I plan to leave in this cabin is a woman I made my own... and a corpse.”

Laureli tried not to show her fear. Her features remained taut and rebellious. “I was expected at Little Wildwood this evening. Even now the men are probably out searching for me.”

“Let them search. They won’t find you here.” Just at that moment, both Laureli and her kidnapper heard the faraway sound of her name drifting through the forest.

Laureli felt her heart skip a beat; the men were, indeed, looking for her. At the sound of the muffled human voices, Johnny slowly unholstered his gun. Then he turned those cruel black eyes to Laureli. “I swear if you utter so much as a sound, I’ll kill you.”

“I have no doubt that you would,” she quipped arrogantly. “Eventually I’m going to be found, and you’re going to hang.”

“You really place that much importance on yourself, eh?” he sneered, pulling at his groin as he sat on a narrow leather settee. The gun wavered menacingly toward her.

“It isn’t because of me that you will hang,” she said, surprised at the courage that sprang into her voice. “It is because of the little boy you murdered.”

“That was a blasted accident. I didn’t mean to kill the kid,” he said, waving the gun at her.

That was about the only thing Johnny had ever said that Laureli truly believed. She knew he had been aiming for Court when Manuel had darted up to sit between them on the seat. She had always known that Johnny was a lout and a bully and that he wouldn’t hesitate to pop the whip at human flesh, but she had never known him to be a killer. He may have boasted, but the boasts had been as empty as the wind.

“What has made you so mean, Johnny?” Laureli asked quietly, moving farther into the corner in hopes of putting more distance between them. He had made his intentions all too clear where she was concerned, and she hoped that she would be able to keep him talking, and preoccupied, until one of the men found her.

Johnny pushed his hat back from his forehead with the butt of the gun. “I reckon it’s ol’ Clyber’s blood runnin’ in my veins. Miss Laureli. My ma said he was real mean, slappin’ around on her an’ all, then goin’ back to Consuelo, his little wife, and treatin’ her like a

“That’s not true,” Laureli quipped. ‘‘Clyber Raines was vicious to Aunt Consuelo.”

‘‘But he never beat her up like he did my ma—”

“That’s because Poppy would have killed him. It was Poppy who kept him in line. There was no one to protect your mother from him.”

“Yep, reckon so.” Johnny smiled a thoughtful, yet rather macabre smile. “If ol’ Clyber wasn’t beatin’ her up, her own pa was. ‘

“And I heard,” Laureli spoke up, still surprised at her own bravery in the face of danger, “that when you got old enough you started beating on her, too. It’s no wonder she died pitiful and alone, so battered by every man, including her own son, who ever touched her, that her features were scarcely recognizable as a woman’s. I don’t know why I ever gave you the benefit of the doubt. I don’t

know why I thought you could truly change. I was such a fool!”

Johnny laughed maniacally. “I really had you goin’, eh, Miss Laureli? You thought ol’ Johnny Raines had become a real gentleman. What a fool you are!”

“And what a fool you are!” she spat back. “To think that you will get yourself out of this fine mess!” Laureli’s eyes darted around the cabin. She saw Belleza nuzzling against Johnny’s big sorrel gelding, the flame dancing in the smoky cover of the oil lamp; she tried to see everything there was in the cabin, even the small cot where Wynn Garrett had died; anything so that she would not have to face the cruel, watchful eyes of the man who intended to hurt her. She had little hope of getting out of this situation unscathed. She could not bear the thought of returning to Court, spoiled by the vicious, roving hands of that brutal man who stood guard over her. She would never be able to face her beloved husband again. But she probably wouldn’t have the chance anyway. Johnny had said he would leave a corpse in the cabin.

When she suddenly became silent, Johnny asked rather sarcastically, “Ain’t you goin’ to plead for your life, Miss Laureli?”

Tight-lipped, she sniffed, ‘‘Would it do any good?”

‘‘Reckon not,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Sure would like to see you crawlin’ though.”

“Like you crawled when I used your own whip on you?”

Laureli should not have said that. Johnny suddenly darted off the low settee, reholstered his gun and approached her. Even as she cringed inwardly, she held her head proudly. She did not so much as whimper when he drew back his hand and hit her very hard across her right cheek. With it stinging like fire, she lifted her eyes defiantly to him.

“Do you feel like a big man now, Johnny?”

Actually, her failure to cringe as he had expected made him feel a little foolish. He wanted to slap her again, but he knew she was too rebellious to respond. He could beat her to death before she would utter a sound. He hated that she had the upper hand—again.

Laureli felt tears stinging her eyes, but she refused to let them violate her cheeks. She would not let Johnny see weakness. Thankful for the near darkness that offered a veil for her emotions, she continued to stare at him with loathing and hatred. He pivoted on his heel and angrily hit his balled fist into the palm of his other hand. He was furious with her, so furious, in fact, that he had temporarily forgotten that he would make her his woman before he killed her. But right now, he was concerned about his own life. He knew there was no possible way to extract himself from this latest folly. He would never get out of the region, even if he left Laureli unscathed. He had seen the wanted posters. If

the law didn’t hang him,

he knew that vigilantes would. He knew that, even now, the Palmer family and every ranch hand for miles around were combing the woods for Laureli. It was inevitable that he would be found, and probably was already the prime suspect in Laureli’s disappearance.

Again, the haunting cry of her name whispered through the night. It was not very far away, perhaps a quarter of a mile or so, but it brought hope to Laureli. She knew that Johnny would not touch her as long as the men were in close proximity to them. He would wait until he was sure they would not be disturbed. Still, she did not like the way he again tugged at his groin, then approached, took her wrist and pulled her to her feet.

She fought him as he tried to imprison her mouth against his ample wet one. “Stop it, Johnny!” she yelled, flinging her head as she tried to evade his seeking mouth. His hands brutally squeezed her wrists, attempting to force them to her back.

“You scream out, little lady, and I swear I’ll kill you and that damned horse, too!”

“You plan... to kill us anyway,” she stammered, trying to retrieve her wrists from her back, continuing to fling her head so viciously that she was sure his face would be covered with bruises in the morning—if he was still alive. When he unrelentlessly continued to assault her, instinctively, she drew her knee firmly up between the legs and he groaned loudly, releasing her and simultaneously clutching at his groin. In that moment, she tried to dart past him toward the door, but he caught her and slammed her up against the cabin wall.

Laureli felt her head hit the wall with a loud thud, but she did not lose consciousness. Dazed and disoriented, she slid down the length of the wall and lay in a crumpled heap, tucking her hand up beneath her head and closing her eyes tightly against that menacing, satanistic creature who sat on the settee, drawing deep breaths and trying to recover from the pain of her carefully aimed attack. She had kicked him damned hard, and he was determined to make her pay for it.

A strange sort of acceptance fell over Laureli. She knew that she would not live through this night. All her hopes lay in Court and the men who searched for her. She knew that Court would not give up, but she was sure that it would be too late when he found her. She thought of her little son without his mother—and Court without his wife. What would become of them? And could Court go on with his life without her? He loved their son very much; she was sure that tiny soul would give him the incentive to continue without her.

Suddenly, that phrase from their marriage vows loomed ominously in her mind:

‘‘Until death us do part.”

She quietly cut her gaze to the narrowed, vengeful eyes of Johnny Raines.

And in that moment, she gave up hope that she would still be alive in the morning.

The searchers met back at Little Wildwood just after dark as planned. They had scouted out over the ranches in a ten-mile radius and had found no trace of Laureli. She had simply been absorbed by the rough Texas terrain.

Court was sick with worry. It was not like Laureli to stay away from Wildwood for so long without telling someone where she would be. She had been made aware of the importance of Jessie’s meeting, and she had said that morning that she was returning to Wildwood. God! If only he had insisted that Anglo accompany her as he had offered.

Poppy, Pavina, and Merita were among the last of the searchers to join them at the Little Wildwood stables. The two young women returned to the house and Poppy,

a heavy gray frown molding his deeply lined face, approached his granddaughter’s husband.

“I don’t know where she is,” Poppy remarked, ‘‘but I don’t have a good feeling about it. This isn’t like Laureli.”

‘‘I know,” Court replied, frowning himself, a great feeling of dread making him feel almost weak in his knees. He couldn’t face the future without Laureli, and her mere absence was a very real threat to that insecurity. ‘‘Rollo Traylor said Johnny Raines had been seen in the region. Do you think he could be responsible for her disappearance?”

‘‘I can’t believe Johnny’s crazy enough to return. He knows there’s a lynch mob after him. And to abduct Laureli? Hell, I can’t believe he’s crazy enough to do that, either. But... he does have Clyber’s blood running in his veins.”

‘‘He was quite angry when I stopped his wedding to Laureli,” Court reminded the older man. “It was me he was aiming for when he shot the little boy. If Johnny happened to meet up with Laureli returning to the house—” Court could not finish the statement. He pressed his lips into a thin line to keep from trembling with rage, and fear.

Poppy scratched his head in a moment of thoughtful silence. Jessie and Anglo were busy exchanging their saddle horses for fresh mounts from the corral. No one really knew what to do. The men stood about as equally confused as Poppy and Court. Fifteen minutes later the new mounts were ready, and the men gathered to form new strategies in the search for Laureli. It was at that moment that Jessie’s youngest son, Joel, rode into the clearing and halted his horse by the group of men.

“Papa, I heard talkin’ in the woods. I heard a lady’s voice, just like Miss Laureli __”

Before Jessie could respond. Court asked, “Where boy? Where did you hear these voices?”

The boy pointed toward the woods. ‘‘Over there by that cabin... the one that’s covered with brambles and bushes. I snuck up on it and I think I saw a light in there. That’s when I heard the lady’s voice.”

Within moments all of the men were mounted and the horses thundered away from Little Wildwood. The last order Jessie had given his youngest son was to stay behind and tell the women where they were going. Joel pouted as he moved toward the house. He had found Miss Laureli, and he felt that he should have been with them when she was rescued. But Joel didn’t feel that an eight-year-old should shed tears of disappointment, so he reported to his mother and grandmother with a proud beam on his face that he had been the one to find his missing relative.

When she could no longer hear the voices of the men calling to her, a great fear rose within Laureli. She was only too aware of the black-clothed Johnny Raines sitting on the edge of the settee, watching her through those narrow, lusty eyes. In the half hour since the last voices had been heard in the woods, she had somehow managed to compose herself and now looked up at Johnny with long-lashed eyes.

‘‘Johnny, you don’t want to hurt me,” she said with soft persuasion. “It will only cause you more trouble.”

Johnny replied in an inconsequential tone of voice, “I couldn’t get in any more trouble, missy. There’s a lynch mob after me, and whether I let you live, or kill you right now, it ain’t goin’ to change what’s goin’ to happen to me. So... rather than letting the Englisher have you, I’ll take you with me.”

“But if you let me go and explain that Manuel’s death was accidental,” she said reasonably, “perhaps the circuit judge will take that into consideration when handing down a sentence.”

Johnny’s eyes became lazy as they narrowed. A faint tremor of laughter shook his voice. “Pleading for your life, eh, missy? Ain’t as strong as you thought you were, are you.”

Laureli gave him a stiff look. “I told you a while ago that you wouldn’t have me crawling... and you certainly won’t have me begging either. If you want to kill me, then do it, and quit trying to frighten me with your threats.” Oh, why had she said that? There was nothing in the world that she wanted to hold onto as preciously as she wanted to her life. She had all the reason in the world for wanting to live; for Court, the husband she adored, and her little son, Daniel. But

even now, with the words scarcely off her tongue, Johnny was again unholstering his pistol. She closed her eyes tightly, waiting for the deafening shot that would end her life. But moments later, silence continued to waft through the chamber; the only sound was Johnny's deep, even breathing. Her own had ceased moments ago and, cautiously, her eyes opened. Johnny moved silently and unobtrusively toward her and his look became hooded and unreadable.

‘‘I told you. Miss Laureli, that I'll make you my woman first... before I finish you off. Then I'll finish off that big mare over there."

"You would be wiser to take her in your attempt to escape," Laureli shot back. "There is no horse in all of Texas that could catch her."

Johnny mused over her words for a moment. ‘‘You'd do anything to save that beast, wouldn't you? Why do you plead for the life of an animal, but not your own?"

"I am not pleading for Belleza's life," she replied quietly. "I am merely saying that she would serve a more useful purpose to you alive. Certainly, she is superior to that nag you're riding."

Johnny amazed her by smiling an almost magnetic smile. ‘‘Hell, Miss Laureli, I paid a hundred dollars for that horse in San Antonio. He's a firm, young gelding. I don't have any complaints."

"Then you didn't notice the narrow space between his front legs, Johnny. That is a sign of a slow, clumsy animal. I thought you knew horse flesh better than that."

‘‘Why, Miss Laureli," he continued in his arrogant tone, "I didn't know you knew horses so well. God, if you ain't the most amazin' woman I ever saw."

"If I know how to use a rifle, and a whip," she quipped, "then I certainly know a good horse."

"And a good man, eh?"

"Of course I know a good man!" Rebellion marked her voice. "And I know that you're a sad, twisted, tormented one.

Unscathed by her words, Johnny returned to the settee and sat down. He still held the handgun, which rested lightly on his knee, pointed in her direction. "Looks like all your friends have given up the search, missy. I think it's time ol' Johnny saw what's beneath those rags you're wearing."

Laureli's eyes shot up with all the rebellion she could muster. "I'm not wearing rags, and I'm not unclothing for you!" Even as she spoke, her hand rose to the bruise he had put on her cheek just half an hour ago. Rebellion would only bring more pain, yet she could not allow him to uncloth her.

"I think you will," Johnny replied hoarsely, yet quietly rising, approaching and

standing beside Belleza. Laureli watched, wide-eyed with horror, as he held the muzzle of the gun against Belleza's large head. "Do I make myself clear, missy?"

"Y-yes." With trembling hands. Laureli began unbuttoning her sleeveless waistcoat, pausing just long enough to anger him.

"Quick about it, damn it!'' he yelled impatiently at her. Tears burned in her eyes, and her hands continued to tremble so violently that she had to take a moment to compose herself. Momentarily, the waistcoat came down the length of her satin sleeves and she dropped it to the floor beside her. When she made no further move, Johnny cocked the gun that still connected to Belleza's head.

An emotional storm rested in Laureli's heart as she-forced herself to begin unfastening the buttons of her blouse, revealing, momentarily, the thin cotton chemise she wore beneath. She could not force her gaze to meet those viciously staring eyes of her captor. She felt humiliated and degraded.

Just as she tearfully started to pull the blouse down her arms the thundering boom of two dozen horses echoed in the clearing around the mass of undergrowth that surrounded the cabin. Johnny instantly uncocked the gun and, moving swiftly across the cabin, pulled Laureli up from her feet and held her close to him. Even in his panic, his hand fondled her breast beneath the thin fabric of her chemise. Revulsed by his disgustingly mauling hands, she thought she would lose her stomach right there.

"Raines... Johnny Raines..." Poppy called stiffly toward the cabin.

Johnny knew it was useless not to answer. The failure of a reply would bring one or more of the men into the underbrush where the cabin stood. He could hear them all around him and he knew he was trapped.

"I've got Laureli in here," he yelled out, trying to choke back the tremble of fear in his voice. "I'll kill her... I swear."

Court had dismounted his horse and was restrained from entering the cabin only by two of Poppy's vaqueros.

''No, senor, if you go in there, he will kill your wife."

''God!" Court muttered. "I can't leave her in his vile clutches!"

Poppy, too, dismounted, followed by Jessie. The other vaqueros and family members remained on their horses. "We'll talk him out. Court. I don't want my granddaughter hurt any more than you."

With a groan of frustration. Court disengaged his arms from the vaqueros. He called toward the cabin, "What do you want, Raines?"

"I want out of here," he said. "You let me ride out and give me an hour's head start, and I'll give your bitch back to you." The gun pressed so firmly against her back caused a whimper of pain to escape Laureli's lips. She could feel the

tremble of fear in Johnny's body as he held her so close. "You tell them, missy," he continued sullenly. "You tell them to let me ride out and I'll give you back to your husband."

"I will not plead for your life... or mine!" she retorted, her lips tightening so that she would not respond again to the pain in her back.

Johnny became desperate, holding Laureli so close that he was sure she was unable to breathe against him. "McKennon... McKennon, are you out there?"

Court had valiantly composed himself. He stood with the other men, fighting the urge to rush into the cabin and save his wife from the mad man. "I'm here," he replied shortly.

"Do you want your wife back?"

"Of course!"

"Then you tell them damn men out there to let me ride out. You tell them to give me a head start."

Court started to comply, but Anglo's hand fell firmly to his arm. "He killed the little boy—one of our own people—and we will not let him get away with it."

Court turned his gray-black eyes furiously toward the vaquero. "You'll let him ride out of here, Anglo, and you'll give him an hour. What you do when you catch up to him will not be blood on my hands. I will not condone the actions of a lynch mob." With the finality of that statement firmly implanted in the mind of each vaquero. Court directed his next statement toward the cabin that was invisible through the underbrush. ''Very well, Raines... you have my word as a gentleman that you will be allowed to ride out of here... in exchange for the safety of my wife."

Inside the cabin, Johnny asked his prisoner, ''Can I trust the Englisher?"

"He has given his word," she replied. "He will honor it." Even as she spoke she discreetly refastened the buttons of her blouse.

"And that big mare... you say she'll outdistance any horse in the state of Texas?"

Laureli shuddered, a frown of indecision marking her brow. "Yes, she could, Johnny," she replied. "But to be truthful about it, she will allow no person in her saddle but me."

"Damn it!" The gun jammed into the small of her back. "You tried to trick me! If I'd taken that horse I'd have been unsaddled before I'd gotten half a dozen feet. And those men would have pounced on me the minute I hit the ground."

"Th—that's why I told you," she stammered nervously. "Court will honor his word to let you go."

Outside the cabin. Court had drawn the men together. "I will not have Laureli's life endangered," he told them. "When Johnny Raines comes out, you let him

mount his horse and ride away. And you give him an hour's head start. Then he's yours, if you can catch him."

The vaqueros reluctantly agreed. But Court knew that they would not let Raines get away. He doubted very seriously the man would still be alive in the morning.

After what seemed like a thousand hours, rather than the few minutes that had actually passed, Raines emerged from the trail over which the brambles had formed a tunnel. His right arm held Laureli close in front of him with the gun held firmly against her temple, and the reins of his horse trailed in his other hand. Laureli stumbled ahead of him, relief sweeping over her features when she saw Court standing at the head of the men.

"You tell the men to throw down their weapons," Johnny ordered nervously, the gun at Laureli's temple unwavering despite the tremble that settled in his body.

Court's left hand went down and momentarily he threw his own weapon away. "Throw down your guns," he ordered, watching as the rifles and handguns hit the dust of the clearing. Only Anglo hesitated and Court ordered firmly, ''You, too... throw it, now!" Even in the vague moonlight. Court could see the ugly bruise on Laureli's right cheek. He was infuriated at the thought of Raines striking her.

Reluctantly, Anglo unholstered his gun and threw it. Only then did Johnny's arm around Laureli begin to loosen. He continued to hold the gun on her as he mounted his horse. "You remember, McKennon," Johnny said, eliciting reaffirmation of his promise, "you said you'd give me an hour."

"And I meant it." Even as he spoke. Court watched the large caliber handgun Johnny continued to aim at Laureli's head. Seeing the tremble that shook her body he wanted to go to her, to draw her into his embrace. "You'd better get going now," Court ordered. "I don't know how long I can hold these men back."

As Raines unexpectedly spurred his horse into the dark forest, the vaqueros flew off their horses to retrieve their weapons. But Court bent to the ground and retrieved his first. He aimed at Anglo, the one whose word the men would listen to. "Control your men, Anglo.

I said Raines would get a head start, and I won't go against my word." Even as he spoke, his arm opened and Laureli moved quietly into his embrace.

His emotions torn between his need to comfort Laureli and his need to control the men, Court held the gun on Anglo and gently rubbed Laureli's back. He could see the daggers of rebellion in Anglo's eyes, even as he reluctantly spoke to the men in Spanish.

Poppy approached and touched his fingers gently to Laureli's cheek. "Thank God you're safe, granddaughter. He hurt you, didn't he?"

Laureli's hand eased up to firmly press his fingers. ''He hit me, but it is a small

bruise,’ she said quietly. ‘‘I was more frightened than hurt. Please, Poppy, make the men honor Court’s word.”

“Any man who doesn’t will be off the ranch before morning,” Poppy promised.

Jessie approached. He said nothing, but touched his mouth in a gentle kiss against Laureli’s cheek. Within moments, all the men had mounted and were returning to Little Wildwood, leaving Laureli in Court’s arms.

“I thought he was going to shoot my mare,” she said quietly.

Court laughed sadly. “Your mare! You were worried about your mare, Laureli?” Tears moistened his eyes, but he managed to smile as he put her slightly back and enjoyed the warm radiance of her features. Just the thought of losing her had created a great emptiness in him. He was so relieved to have her back in his arms. And she had been worried about her horse! He couldn’t help but look at her with awe and wonderment. “God! That’s an awful bruise. Let’s get home so that Pietra can apply a salve to it. I think it’s a little late for Jessie’s get-together this evening. Let’s return home. Hell!” Only now missing the horse, he looked around. “Where is that mare, anyway?”

“She’s inside the cabin,” Laureli replied. ‘‘Shall I fetch her?”

“Not without me,” he replied. “I won’t let you out of my sight again... not ever.”

Laureli moved gracefully into his arms. “Oh, Court—” The emotion of the day suddenly surfaced. Tears were in her eyes and were lost against the soft fabric of his shirt. “I was so frightened, not just for my life, but at the thought of losing you and our son.”

Standing in the dark clearing. Court held her for a long, long while, until she ceased to tremble against him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A few minutes past midnight a storm began to gather on the distant horizon, casting shadows across the full moon that appeared to touch the tallest fir in the forest. Jessie stood solemnly beside the narrow hole that Anglo had dug earlier in the morning, staring at the makeshift coffin that was hardly large enough to hold five pounds of grain. A glimmer of moonlight shone on Elsa Palmer’s white marble tombstone, an ominous reminder of the nightmare Jessie had suffered when the packhorse had thrown him on the trail. After a moment of solemn silence, Jessie opened his palm and looked at the object resting there: the large ancient gold ring that he had taken from the cavern so many years ago, and that Sam had taken from him while he had been unconscious.

Jessie was very hurt that he should have been suspected in the destruction of the hill, yet he could understand the reasoning of the Englishman who had spent several days excavating the remains of the horse. Jessie had planned to condemn

the ring to the grave along with Sam's bones, but giving it to the antiquary was the least he could do for the man who had lost everything that morning. He didn't know how he would explain the ring, but he was fairly certain he would not admit to finding it beneath the hill.

Every Christmas Day for the past twenty years Jessie had spoken to Sam in his grave on the hill. But on this warm summer night he could find nothing to say that had not already been said. Sam would be content lying beside the only person who'd had confidence that he could make something of himself one day. Perhaps Sam's spirit—and Jessie's conscience—could now rest in peace. As he began to shovel dirt onto the small coffin that had been a grain bin just that morning, Jessie began to compose in his mind what he would tell the family about Sam. He had a very big decision to make: Should he also tell the family about the ancient treasure?

As Jessie shoveled the last bit of dirt onto the mound, gently tapping it down, he found the moment to feel a little guilty that, for one split second, he had placed Sam's fate, and the meeting he had called, ahead of Laureli's close call with death. He had expected Anglo to accompany him to Sam's new gravesite, but an hour after Johnny Raines had disappeared into the forest, Anglo had gathered twenty-seven vaqueros and hands from the surrounding ranches and had formed an unsanctioned posse. Jessie wouldn't want to be in Johnny's boots right now. j

A few minutes later Jessie moved unobtrusively from the graveyard, over the narrow brick bridge crossing a babbling brook, and returned to the house. After the excitement of the night, children continued to stir around the house, and the women sat in the parlor, sipping tea and talking about Laureli's very active day. Speculations were being mulled over as to what would become of Johnny Raines, and everyone felt the same as Jessie felt that night. When and if the posse caught up to Johnny, there might not be enough left of him to hang.

When Jessie moved from the darkness of the foyer into the parlor, Consuelo rose and greeted him with a light kiss. ‘‘Jessie where have you been? Poppy was looking for you."

‘‘I had some things to do," he replied quietly.

"What things?"

"Just things."

"Poof! Are you being secretive!" Consuelo exclaimed, tucking her arm through his as they moved toward the divan where Tia sat. "First you call a meeting to tell us something. Then this terrible thing with Laureli comes up, and now—poof!—you take off into the night and you return with more secrets!" Although she spoke harshly, she smiled when Jessie met her dark, loving gaze.

‘‘Quit that nagging, woman,” he spoke affectionately. ‘‘I don’t know how I’ve put up with you all these years.”

“It is because you love me,” Consuelo replied, her face, at middle age, still round, youthful, and radiant.

“Indeed, I do,” Jessie laughed, feeling, even in Consuelo’s vibrant company the pang of sadness that had accompanied him from the cemetery. “You and the children have been my life.”

“And will be!” Consuelo responded, extracting her arm from his so that she could pour him a cup of tea. “For many years to come!”

In a rare display of affection in the presence of Consuelo’s mother, Jessie kissed her lightly on the cheek. “A thousand years would not be long enough,” he replied so that only she could hear. “The love I feel for you cannot be adequately expressed in one lifetime.”

Court stood at the veranda rail and looked out over the lawns of the ranch house that was more like a southern mansion nestled in the foothills of the Brazos. He had left Laureli in the kitchen with Pietra, telling her about the events of the day as the older woman applied a salve to the abrasion on her cheek. Moments ago Court had visited the nursery, where he had sat in Senora Ketti’s rocking chair for a few minutes and talked to his little son, who was restless tonight and had been fretting over newly cut teeth.

Court felt an ache inside, wrenching at him so deeply that he was not sure of the source. He knew only how he felt at almost losing Laureli and it pained him that she joked with Pietra about it as though it had been simply another trivial activity of the day.

And now, she was enjoying a hearty midnight meal, and he was too sick inside to eat so much as a bite. A warm breeze wafted across the veranda, bringing with it a vaguely familiar aroma. He looked toward the stable and saw Lord Wesley Rogers walking briskly toward him, puffing on a large carved pipe that emitted the aroma of sickeningly sweet tobacco.

‘‘Mr. McKennon, your lads in the bunkhouse tell me that there was a bit of excitement today.”

“Yes... a bit,” Court replied evenly. He really did not want to talk about it any longer. Actually, he was surprised there were enough men left at the bunkhouse to tell Lord Wesley anything. Many of the men were gone. Joe had tried to tell Court they’d ridden into Brazoria to spend their week’s wages, but it was, after all, Sunday night, and the men usually remained in the bunkhouse. He suspected they’d gone against his orders and had joined the lynch mob in pursuit of Johnny Raines. There was not much he could do about the savage passions of the Texans. His only alternative, if the lynch mob was successful, would be to

discharge any Wildwood men who had participated. It would create hard feelings, but morally, there would be nothing else he could do.

After a moment. Lord Wesley attempted to encourage conversation. ‘‘Well, tell me... is your lady all right after her ordeal?”

“She is fine,” Court replied, gritting his teeth. “As a matter of fact, she is having a late meal.”

“Good!” Lord Wesley mounted the steps and stood beside Court at the rail. “A ravenous appetite is a sure sign that the unfortunate event has not traumatized her.”

Only now did the frown that had clung to him all evening leave his face. Court actually smiled. ‘‘You use words like that around her, Lord Wesley, and the boys will think you’re talking dirty.”

‘‘Indeed—” Lord Wesley replied, puffing on his pipe. “They are an ignorant lot.”

Court took offense at the remark. He had grown close to the men who worked on the ranch. “Not ignorant, sir, perhaps uneducated. But they’re a good lot of men.”

“Sorry, old boy, didn’t mean to offend you. Tell me...” Lord Wesley cleared his throat. “Did you find out if the man, Palmer, dynamited the hill?”

“In view of the trouble we had today, no one had a chance to talk about the hill,” Court replied, straightening, arching his back to relieve the tension he felt there, “but I personally do not believe he had anything to do with it.” Court sighed deeply, to settle the tremor of outrage inside him. “Were you able to salvage any more of your equipment?”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. McKennon. The hill will be pretty well settled after this storm that’s coming up. I was looking at it in the afternoon sun. It would be a grand place to build a house, right there at the bend in the river.”

Court arched a dark eyebrow. “Who have you been talking to?”

“The foreman, Joe Fuller, tells me that you have ordered the makings of a Victorian house and that it should be arriving aboard various ships at Galveston Bay in the next year. You should consider that spot, Mr. McKennon, when you build that fine house for your lady, though I can’t imagine why you’d want to build it in this godforsaken country.”

“It’s a fine country,” Court replied matter-of-factly.

“Yes, indeed, a fine country... but, availing myself of your local newspapers and the adversities that have befallen this Mr. Lincoln from Illinois, there may be another storm gathering far beyond those black clouds that are gathering overhead, one with much more lasting consequences.”

Court frowned. Indeed, a political storm brewed. Since the nomination of

Abraham Lincoln at the Chicago Republican Convention in May, Southerners had been in an uproar because of his anti-slavery, anti-South sentiments. There had even been talk of secession in the South if he was elected, and Texas was as hotheaded as her sister states.

But that was something Court did not want to think about. Before today, and beginning afresh tomorrow, things had been and would be tranquil at Wildwood. He didn't want to think of secession and, God forbid, a civil war, though even the remotest solution to political squabbles was possible.

As they stood there watching the thunderclouds move toward them from the horizon, with scatterings of distant thunder gaining in clarity, the men who had joined Anglo's posse began drifting back into Wildwood. Jan Walters rode up to the veranda, surprised that the house was still lit against the darkness of midnight. "Mr. McKennon... the boys and me—we decided not to be part of a lynch mob. Anglo's real riled up, bein' that the boy was a Mexican like himself. He's got the other vaqueros riled up, too, an' it looks like they're closin' in on Johnny."

Court drew his hands to his slim hips. "It's a good thing you boys decided to return. If you hadn't, you wouldn't have had jobs tomorrow."

Jan grinned. ''Sort of thought that's the way things would be." Jan tipped his hat as he turned his horse toward the stable, "Good night, boss... Mr. Rogers—"

"That's Lord Rogers!" the Englishman quipped, his reprimand drowned by the roll of thunder over the house. Just as the rain began. Lord Rogers covered his pipe with his hands and moved quickly toward the bunkhouse. ''Good night, Mr. McKennon. It appears that the storm has arrived."

Court stood silently against the light coming from the parlor windows, allowing the raindrops driving from the north to pelt against his face. Somehow, the thunder and lightning and rain helped to dissipate the anger he felt inside, and a moment of calmness came over him. He may have stood there, permitting the rain to slash against him, if Laureli had not stepped out to the veranda. She stood against the door, trying to be silent and unobtrusive, but the sweet aroma of her was all that was needed to remind him that she stood there.

Stubbornly he did not acknowledge her and Laureli was a little baffled. ''Court?" She spoke his name quietly.

"What is it, Laureli?" He responded briskly, almost rudely.

He had been so worried about her; had folded her into his arms when Johnny Raines had released her and had sworn his love and his innermost fears of losing her. Now he acted as though she meant nothing to him and that the day's events had been nothing more than normal activities. She was hurt that he could be so indifferent to her and speak to her as though she were bothering him. Thus, she

turned and fled into the house and up the stairs toward their bedchamber.

Court stood there for a while longer, nursing his hurt, and very aware that he had hurt her. He ached to run to her, but that vicious, lethal pride bubbling from within him seemed to make lead weights of his feet. He imagined even now that she had thrown herself upon the pillow and was weeping, and certainly did not know why he was being cruel.

Damn it! Again, Court righted himself and arched his aching shoulders. He had spent the evening on horseback knowing in his heart that she was in danger. And now, because she took the escapade so lightly—indeed, it had not even affected her appetite—he was punishing her with brisk responses and open displays of hostility. He had been unfair. Thus, he turned to enter the house.

Only as his hand fell to the knob did he realize how much he had hurt her. She had locked him out of the house. He stood there for a moment, looking at the door in utter shock, then braved the thrashing storm and moved to the kitchen entrance. He found the large room dark and the door there locked, also.

He refused to be barred from his wife's house. He could sleep in the bunkhouse for the night, but he could not bear the thought of being ribbed by the men. Thus, he shielded his eyes against the blinding rain, studied the trellis leading to the upper veranda and tried to mentally scour a path between the climbing rose vines and their treacherous thorns.

Thunder and lightning assailed the night skies as he began to climb the trellis. He was pricked a few times on his hands and forearms before he finally climbed over the rail of the second floor veranda. He was angry as hell as he moved toward the French doors of their private bedchamber, doors that were usually left open, even during a good rain. But they, too, were locked, and he gently shook the doors.

"Laureli, let me in. Laureli?" He could hear her movements inside but she did not respond. If she was waiting for him to plead with her to open the door, she would wait forever. She was being unreasonable. He shook the door with more violence. "Meet me in... now, Laureli!" Still she did not respond and with an angry groan, he removed his torn, soaking wet shirt and wrapped it around his balled fist. Then he smashed one of the small panes of glass and reached his hand in to unlock the door.

He stepped into the room, catching sight of her in the darkness, her pale-blue eyes sporadically illuminated by the sheet lightning. She sat on her knees on the bed and stared at him, tight-lipped.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Laureli?" he asked, unwrapping his hand and throwing the shirt to a dark corner.

‘‘What is wrong with me!" she echoed harshly. ‘‘What do you mean? What is

wrong with you! You are the one who is acting like I have committed a mortal sin!”

“I am not!” he quipped sarcastically. “Because I wanted to be alone on the veranda, you locked me out of the house?”

“You are sulking,” she accused. “And I bloody well don’t know what I did to bring on such a black mood.”

“Don’t talk like a common street wench,” he said, sitting in the chair, then trying to remove his soaking wet boots. “And don’t ever lock me out of the house again!”

Laureli watched him undress as though nothing had happened. He had just broken a window, and it would take a month to get in a replacement. It was, after all, her parents’ home, and he had no right to break the window.

He was just about to step out of his pants when Laureli quietly said, “You’re not sleeping in here tonight. You can sleep in the guest chamber.”

“Like hell I will,” he responded in her same quiet tone. “You are my wife, and I will sleep in your bed.”

“No, you won’t!”

“Yes, I will!” Court stood, his black hair plastered to his forehead. His dark eyes narrowed furiously as they connected to her defiant powder-blue gaze.

“Very well,” she sniffed, turning her nose up as she continued to watch him, “I will move to the guest chamber.”

Before she could ease from the bed and move a foot or so across the floor. Court was between her and the bed.

‘‘If you want to fight about this, Laureli, I’m more than willing.”

‘‘I am a reasonable woman. I behave in peaceful solutions.”

Without warning, Court sprang forward and caught her body in a firm grip agains his own. His eyes blazed into hers and she refused to glance away, lest he feel victorious. ‘‘I don’t believe that moving from your husband’s bed will comprise a peaceful solution!”

“Then tell me,” she quipped haughtily, “why you were so crisp with me on the veranda? I merely wanted to stand with you and watch the storm with you.”

The sultry tremble of her mouth as she spoke did something to him. He felt a wild, primal instinct swell within him, aching across his shoulders and flooding through him like an iron-hot river. “Laureli, don’t you know how scared I was today? God! I almost lost you. You could have been killed, and you treated the incident like a trip to the stable to visit your mare. I heard you relating the experience to Pietra just as though it had been nothing more than that! Yes, I was angry. The thought of losing you tore me apart today. I felt empty, less than a man, because I could do nothing... nothing to help you!”

“Is that what’s troubling you?” she asked quietly. “You wanted me to return to the house a mass of nerves, trembling like a frightened kitten because I was almost killed? Court—” She did not protest the firmness of his arms around her slender frame. “When Johnny Raines rode away and I stood in your arms, I was safe. Safe! In your arms I could feel no danger. It was as though the terror of the day and night had never existed at all. You, your strength, your love erased the horrid fears I felt as Johnny’s captive. You are the reason I am happy... and why I feel safe and unthreatened. It is not because I treated the affair today lightly. Dear God. I am not that stupid. It is because it’s over and I am safe in your arms.”

The directness of her thinking came to him as a sharp rebuke. He watched her eyes dart over his rain-drenched features, felt her hands at his back gently begin to caress his taut flesh. Momentarily, his hand came up to her thick auburn hair and wove through its masses. “Forgive me. I forget how strong you are.”

“No,” she amended quietly. “You forget how safe your strength makes me feel. Today is over... there is tonight now. We are together and alone.”

Court forced his eyebrows together in an effort to look stern. “But I thought you were on your way to the guest chamber.”

“Do you want me to go?” she asked, lightly shrugging. “Of course, if you wish that I not sleep with you—”

“I want you to stay here. I insist that you stay here where you belong.” Without further words, Court began to back toward the bed, turning her to it when his knee brushed against the mattress. He eased her to her back and immediately covered her slender frame. She sucked in a surprised breath as his soggy wet pants ignored the thin fabric of her gown, like ice upon her passion-sensitive skin.

With a low chuckle, her fingers moved to deftly unfasten the buttons of the trousers and pull them down his rain-cooled thighs. Then she moved up on the mass of pillows at the head of the bed, tucked her feet beneath the hem of her gown and opened her arms to him.

There was no artificial light in the room, only the occasional flashes of lightning permeating the chamber, glowing across his summer-bronzed skin and taut muscles. As he moved upon her from the edge of the bed, his hands eased beneath the fabric of her gown and drew it up as he caressed her. She leaned forward and raised her arms so that he could remove the garment. She wanted only to lie in his arms and to feel the masculine prowess of him, like a long, lean panther stalking her in the darkness of their bedchamber. She felt the excitement of his touch, the coolness of his lips become instant fire as they imprisoned her own.

Suddenly, Court pulled her so close to him that she could scarcely breathe. There was a difference in the way he held her—almost possessive—as though he feared that if he let her go she would be lost to him forever. She only then realized how physically and mentally draining the day had been for him. He had been worried sick over her, and that was why he had gotten so angry. She felt the tremble of his shoulders, his arms, the shudder that wracked his body as he continued to hold her, to caress her head beneath the thickness of her auburn hair.

"Oh, Court... Court," she whispered. "You thought—that I would be killed tonight, didn't you?"

"Yes," he whispered, unable to hold back the tremble in his voice. "Forgive me... forgive me for not realizing your pain."

Court put the tiniest breath of space between them. Gently his hands cupped her lovely features. When their eyes met, Laureli saw the greatest magnitude of pain there in his gray-black gaze. "I cannot imagine life without you, Laureli. You are my heart and my soul. I swear to God, I want to see Johnny Raines dead for what he did to you today." Tenderly, his lips touched the abrasion on her right cheek. "A man who will terrorize a woman... who will strike her... is not a man. He is a beast!"

Roughly, Court imprisoned her mouth against his own, tantalizing her, teasing her, possessing her. She felt the warmth of her flesh become fire beneath his masterful caresses and suddenly, Laureli allowed her mind to drift away to a far, distant place that could only be borne of imagination. She wanted only her body and her passions to be in command on the exotic plane that she created away from the mortal world she shared with Court. She imagined that they knelt together on smooth marble beside a lake as clear as glass. Behind them large columns supported the ruins of an ancient Grecian temple, and an exotic, unknown species of flora and fauna all around them weeped gold and silver fronds that glimmered across the crystal lake. The walls of their bedchamber suddenly transformed into multihued mountains of gold and rose shimmering beneath a morning sun that fired and fused their flesh as one. Laureli bathed in the glorious picture forming in her imagination.

"Court... Court, we are together..." She shuddered wondrously beneath the fluid movement of his hands at the curve of her hips, moving across the flat plane of her stomach. All the while, his mouth teased a whisper-soft trail over her cheek, nipping at her earlobe, then following the line of her auburn tresses until the slim column of her neck was erotically assailed by his kisses. When his mouth sought lower treasures, she offered the hard peaks of her breasts that had branded his firm chest, her back arching almost violently in her attempt to feel the icy fire of

his explorations.

Even though his body ached for her, Court paused a brief moment, then teased a trail back across the tiny pulse in her neck and found her moist, parted mouth, offering her the gentle probing of his tongue. ‘‘Yes, we are together, Laureli...”

“Do you feel the warmth of the sun?” she murmured, bathing in the scene of her imagination. “Do you feel the coolness of the crystal lake? And the reflections of the golden trees glimmering across our skin?”

“Yes... yes...” he murmured in reply, capturing her mouth in teasing kisses before caressing each of her eyelids in turn. “I feel all those things... see all those things. Your dream... is my dream.”

Laureli enjoyed the tautness of his body against her slim one, the iron-hard masculinity of him against her thigh. She knew how she felt and hoped that Court would sink helplessly into the crystal-clear, sensual depths of her eyes where her dream had manifested itself.

And Court had done just that. He felt passionately insane as he imagined those glimmering mountains, and the shimmering fauna she had described to him. He could almost feel the gentle waft of a breeze across that crystal lake, surely as clear as those sensually narrowed eyes meeting his fleeting glances. There were so many magnetic treasures drawing his attentions to this slim, passion-sensitive feminine form beneath his own that he suddenly wished he had a thousand hands. He had never found foreplay so wondrously painful before.

Wild, uninhibited longing unfolded within him. He eased between her parted thighs and tucked his hands for one long moment beneath the thick masses of her hair. He felt heavy upon her, but he was actually feather light, putting just a breath of space between her as he continued to melt into her loving gaze. He watched her intently, longingly, her rosebud mouth gently parted, betraying her pearly white teeth. As he moved upon her, feeling her knees slightly rise and press against his slim thighs, he nipped playfully at her willing mouth, felt her hands tenderly circle his shoulders and become firm in their desire to close that annoying little space parting their rapturous bodies.

Then when he could bear the wondrous pain growing insurmountable in his groin. Court instinctively moved toward her silky flesh and the grand treasure that she lifted in greeting to him, to be filled with the masculine command of him. With a gentle purr, she sought his mouth, unwilling to release it to seek other treasures of her quaking flesh.

For Court there was nothing sweeter than her mouth, her ivory flesh that shivered with icy fire, her thighs that rose to meet his rhythm and pace, suffusing his body with her gentle fantasy of a far, distant place beneath weeping fronds of silver and gold. Splendor enveloped him like a flaming fog, and she was all that

existed for him at the moment. No storm thrashed against the windowpanes or dampened the drapery where, in a moment of heated anger, he had broken out one small rectangle of glass. There was only the lovely existence of the two of them, together in the dream world they shared.

But yet a storm of passion burst within him, as he felt the dampness of her body beneath him, moving with such wicked splendor, molding to his in a river of no return.

Laureli melted into the blanket of his muscled arms that held her firmly. She sank helplessly into the gray eyes that held her crystal ones, and yet her own fantasy held them together in the delicious heat of their passion.

An agonizing groan rumbled from Court's throat. He felt the throbbing quest for fulfillment and need surface from the fiery core of his very being, enveloping him and the woman he loved within a vast vortex of mutual surrender.

Instinctively, Laureli clutched Court to her and enjoyed the simultaneous fulfillment of their gentle, yet powerful lovemaking. She could not remember this ecstatic surrender before—sweet and unabandoned—yet she knew she had felt this surrendering warmth and happiness before, on so many, many nights. She continued to clutch at his shoulders, until his deep breathing slowed and his damp head collapsed against her moist cheek. Only then did the thrashing, thunderous surges of the storm return to them with full force, shattering against the house as forcefully as had their suffused bodies just moments before.

Momentarily, Court chuckled hoarsely, ‘‘God, woman, you could shackle me to the wall right now and I would be powerless to stop you!"

As he eased from her and folded her into the warmth of his arms, Laureli snuggled against his hair-matted chest, enjoying the muskiness of him, the moist, warmth of his body that had enraptured her and made her forget the argument they'd had so short a while ago. ‘‘If I were to shackle you," she cooed, "it would be to this bed."

Again, Court chuckled. ‘‘And I certainly would not protest, my darling. You have already chained me to your heart. I might as well be chained to your bed as well."

Laureli met his eyes, which appeared as fathomless ebony depths in the sporadic flashes of lightning outside the windows. Tenderly, her forefinger touched his mouth, and he just as tenderly kissed it. For just a moment, a gentle, feminine laugh wafted through the chamber, and Court gave her one of those wicked looks, with his right eyebrow arched. "I was thinking," she said, caressing his mouth with her fingertip, "how funny it would be to have a naked man chained in our bed, to be nourished and clothed—"

"And loved," he murmured. "Don't forget that very important ingredient in the

life of a willing prisoner.”

“Yes, and loved,” she offered. “I believe I could meet those requirements, unless, of course, you would rather have Pietra take care of all your needs.”

Now, Court arched both his dark eyebrows. “God forbid!” When she again chuckled, he gathered her in his arms and held her firmly. “My teasing little wife, I should take you across my lap and spank you.”

The tip of her pert nose grazed against his cheek. “Spank me?” she echoed with silken seduction. “I would be more receptive to... lovemaking.”

“I’ll bet you would, you little vixen!” he replied fondly, yet with more inflection, turning to his side and propping himself on one elbow. “Just think, moments ago one or the other of us was on the verge of removing ourselves from the marriage chamber.’’

Laureli tucked her slim body up against him. ‘‘Oh... not really. Don’t you know that making up after an argument is so... exhilarating? Did we not enjoy one another more tonight because of our little tiff?”

Court’s eyes smiled, but his lips did not. “So! That was your ploy in locking me out of house and home!” he accused without anger. ‘‘Actually, now that I think about it, tonight wasn’t half bad. I believe you’re improving in this very delicate art between man and woman.”

Laureli drew in a ragged breath of surprise as she met his laughing eyes. “Ooh! Wasn’t half bad!” she echoed his words. “Are you saying that you have had better than me?”

Court chuckled wickedly as his arm moved tenderly to her taut back and molded her against his body. “You are unparalleled in all the universe, Laureli. You are the only woman I want. The only woman in my memories. I had no life before you.”

Coyly, she met her loving husband’s gaze. “I hope you always feel that way about me, Court. There will never be a day that I do not want you in my life.”

Court closed his eyes, replying with sincerity, “Good! Because such a day will not exist.”

In the exquisite exhaustion of their day and their moments of lovemaking, Laureli and Court quickly fell asleep in each other’s arms. Sometime in the night one or the other of them drew the cool sheets over their entwined bodies, and nothing, not even the continuing storm, disturbed their togetherness as the darkness moved magically toward the dawn.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Monday morning, as usual, began with the men complaining as they prepared for yet another week on the ranges. Court lay quietly in the semi-darkness of the predawn, listening to the stirrings of the men drift across the otherwise quiet day.

He smelled bacon and eggs frying on the bunkhouse griddle, and moments later, he heard the snort of horses being led from the corrals, then the thud of saddles falling to protesting backs.

Court knew he would have to rise in a few minutes and ride out to the range with the men. He and Joe would decide which of the cattle would be driven to Sedalia next week. He wanted to keep some of the younger heifers for breeding and drive them to the west ranges where the grass was more plentiful.

Laureli still slept, nestled like an innocent child against his shoulder. He tried nudging her, but she protested with a low whimper. Smiling as he watched her sleepy face lost in the shadows of dawn, he allowed her to ease closer to him in her sleep. When her fingers moved gently to his chest, he closed his hand over them.

How lovely she was in her sleep: her pert nose, her slightly parted mouth, the almost translucent violet of her eyelids beneath finely chiseled brows, long, sooty lashes lying gently upon her crimson cheeks—such beauty marred by the ugly bruise that Raines had left there yesterday. It still angered him that his Laureli had been abused. His hand closed in comfort over her shoulder, over smooth, flawless skin that was warm beneath his touch. He felt the long, slim length of her against his side, and he felt the stirrings of passion instinctively fill him.

Court sighed deeply. For the time being, those passions would have to go unquenched. They both had quite a day yesterday, a full night of rapturous lovemaking, and Court now faced a long, busy day ahead of him. Thus, with a stifled grumble, he slipped from the bed, pulled on his trousers and approached the washstand.

He had just combed his hair back, thoughtfully mulling over the day's growth on his chin—electing not to shave this morning—and was pulling on his shirt when he met Laureli's reflection in the mirror of the wash-stand. He turned and favored her with a warm smile. ‘‘Good morning, love," he greeted, approaching to sit on the bed beside her. With a gentle sweep of his hand, he flicked the strands of auburn hair from her cheek and forehead. ‘‘You are beautiful in the mornings," he whispered, touching his mouth to her cheek. "And in the afternoons... and the evenings..."

"And the nights?" she whispered provocatively.

Again, his mouth caressed her cheek. "Especially at night," he replied. When her hands slipped beneath his shirt and connected to his bare skin, he took them and brought them together, to kiss them.

"Must you rush off?" she asked.

"I must," he replied with marked reluctance. "Joe and I will quarter off the herd

that will go to Sedalia next week. I'm sure that after last evening's storm, there'll be stragglers to bring in."

"Thank God there was no stampede."

Court continued to caress her hands against his unshaven cheek. "Luck Walters and a couple of the other men were with the herd last night.''

Suddenly, a thought came to Laureli. She was just about to mention Johnny Raines when a man's loud voice quaked toward the house with two short words: ''God Almighty!"

Laureli sprang forward in the bed, clutching the bedcovers to her nakedness. Court moved quickly toward the French doors and walked out to the second-story veranda. Joe sat astride his horse, anticipating Court's appearance.

''You better come out here and see this, Court."

Court frowned. "What is it, Joe?"

Laureli had quietly arisen and pulled on her robe. She moved to Court's side and watched as Joe's eyes cut between the two of them. "I'd rather not say in front of your Mrs.," he replied soberly.

Court felt a sinking premonition grab at his chest. He turned, briefly held Laureli's arms, then without words moved toward the door. Laureli stood on the veranda until she saw Court emerge below, speak in low tones with Joe, then move toward the woodline where Joe had pointed. Laureli could see several of the other men, some on foot and some astride their horses, lingering in the area beside the stable.

Court could not believe what Joe had just told him. He moved toward the woodline to the right of the stable and made his way through the men and horses that surrounded little Manuel's grave beneath the big oak tree where he had once played. As he reached the sight, he drew in a sick, ragged breath, fighting the urge to turn swiftly away from the gruesome sight before him. Dangling at the end of a thick rope was Johnny Raines, his feet mere inches away from the ground and his hands tied behind him with rawhide. His face was purple and grotesquely swollen. He had been gagged to keep him from screaming out while the vaqueros had hanged him directly over Manuel's grave. Reigning in the rage and sickness he felt, Court lightly touched the hand of the dead man. It was still warm; he had not been dead more than a couple of hours.

Knowing that he had to maintain some semblance of dignity. Court began snapping orders in a brisk, almost rude tone. ''Jan... ride over to Little Wildwood and tell Poppy his vaqueros have hanged Raines. Luck, you and Pete cut the body down, and some of you other men dig a grave over in the woods."

No words were spoken as Court returned to the side of the stable and drew his knuckles firmly against his mouth. Fury tightened his jawline and made his body

so rigid that he felt pain in his back and shoulders. Joe approached and stood with him. He hesitated to speak, although he knew that something had to be said.

"He did kill the little boy," Joe reminded him, "and he kidnapped your wife."

Just at that moment Lord Wesley approached and inquired about the trouble. Briefly, Joe explained it to him.

"My God... what a barbaric bunch!" Lord Wesley exclaimed, moving, nonetheless, toward the side of the stable to view the body for himself.

Court knew that when he spoke, he would be unable to keep the tremble of rage out of his voice. He felt it now, bubbling from so deep within him that he could scarcely maintain control. "I know that he killed the boy and kidnapped my wife!" he said to Joe between firmly clamped teeth. "He deserved to hang... but not to be lynched! I cannot—will not—condone this! Why, for God's sake, did those hotheads have to bring him here to hang him? Why here?"

Joe shrugged his broad shoulders. Although he felt that Court knew the reason, he replied nonetheless, "It's because of the boy. He killed the boy so they hanged him over his grave. Mexicans have a peculiar way about them, Court."

Court turned and composed himself, dropped his hand to Joe's forearm but immediately withdrew it. "I know... God! Vigilantes! If I have my way about it, the men who are responsible will not work for Laureli's family."

"All the vaqueros from Little Wildwood were not in on it," Joe assured him. "One... maybe two... Anglo, for sure.

Court's eyes suddenly shot black daggers from their cool depths. "Then you'd better find out which men were responsible, because they're the ones who will be discharged." As Joe moved away, returning his broad-brimmed hat to his head as he did so, Laureli approached and stood almost within touching distance of Court. He invited her into the protection of his arm.

"What happened, Court?"

Gently, he massaged her back through the thin cotton shirt she had pulled on with her riding skirt. "Raines... the vaqueros hanged him over the boy's grave."

Laureli gave a small cry of shock and disbelief. Johnny Raines had been vile and despicable, but to end so horribly—no, it should not have happened even to that cruel beast. "Dear Lord..." she replied quietly. "Is he still there?"

"He's being cut down. Some of the men are digging a grave in the woods."

"Will you inform the authorities in Bolivar?"

That was something Court had not considered. A crime had been committed against Johnny Raines; but the vaqueros would view the hanging as an eye for an eye. Thus, Court made a decision that went a hundred percent against the grain of his conscience. "No, the authorities will not be informed," he replied after a moment.

Together they moved toward the house, the sun just now bathing them in brilliant red through the dark green fronds of the forest, its rays shimmering across the lawn of Wildwood.

Pietra chose not to make any of her rude comments when given the news of Johnny's death. Rather, she prepared a large breakfast for both of them, and a tray for Senora Ketti, which she personally took to her while Court and Laureli tried to eat. But both their appetites had been dampened by the gruesome act committed on the ranch.

Laureli picked at her scrambled eggs, remembering, with a shudder, Johnny's sneering voice yesterday; his hand drawing back to leave the ugly bruise upon her cheek that was terribly painful this morning. She had always known that he'd been born just to end up at the end of a rope.

Court settled back in his chair and watched her pick at her plate. They said nothing, but occasionally their eyes met, mixtures of anger and sympathy reflecting as they simultaneously mulled over the repercussions that could result from Johnny's death. Laureli knew her grandfather well enough that he would sever the employment of the responsible men. It remained to be seen, though, how the law would treat the vigilante lynch mob. Court had said he would not report the incident to the police authority in Bolivar, but one of the men, on a Saturday night drinking spree in town, might possibly let something spill. Texas Rangers hung around the saloons like every other man in the county, and they were always listening for something that might take the drudgery out of their jobs.

Soon, Joe returned to Wildwood and joined them in the kitchen. Court cut a look at Laureli in an attempt to dismiss her, but she pretended to ignore him. After all, Wildwood was her parents' ranch, and she had a right to know its business. When Joe saw that she had no intention of leaving, he announced, "Anglo and one vaquero were responsible. The others returned to Little Wildwood shortly after midnight. Both men tried to deny hanging Johnny, but they came dragging in just before dawn. Their guilt was clear enough to Poppy. The two of them have been told to pack up and get out and they didn't make a fuss about it."

"I don't want them causing any trouble in the future."

"They'll stay in the area but they won't make any trouble," Joe replied. ''When Anglo was preparin' to ride out, he admitted to me that he and Cruz hanged Johnny. Anglo said he did what had to be done and there were no hard feelings against the family." Joe turned toward the kitchen exit but immediately turned back. "By the way, Jessie will be wantin' to see you and Laureli this evenin'. He said to come to dinner. Whatever he was goin' to tell you last night, he wants to

get it over with tonight."

"Did he give you any clues?" Court asked, knowing, even as he spoke, that Jessie would not have confided in the burly foreman.

"None. He did say that he wanted you to believe he had nothing to do with the collapse of the hill... that God brought down the hill, and He must have had good reasons." Joe nodded perfunctorily. "I'll see you on the range, Court."

Court rose. "I'll ride out with you now, Joe. We'd better get an early start on that herd."

Laureli, too, stood up from her chair, her breakfast plate as full as when she'd sat down to it. "Would you gentlemen mind if I join you? I don't think I'll enjoy being cooped up in the house today."

Only now did the frown leave Court's face. He actually smiled. "I'll saddle your horse," he offered.

"I'll be just a minute," she replied, touching him briefly as she eased by him. "I'd like to say good morning to our son first and tell Pietra that I will be away for the day. I believe she is in her room praying for Johnny's soul.

After Laureli left Pietra, she found Senora Ketti much more cordial today. Pietra's warning had certainly changed her attitude. She liked Wildwood more than any of the other positions she had held, as well as its many luxuries, and she was intent on staying, even if she had to share her precious little charge with his mother every now and then. As Laureli played with her happily cooing son, Senora Ketti exchanged pleasantries, expressed her remorse over the terrible thing that had been done that morning, and even asked Laureli if she was going to take her son to Little Wildwood for the family gathering that evening.

Meeting the plump features of the middle-aged nanny, Laureli smiled her warmest smile. ''No, Daniel had better remain at home. It is some topic of a serious nature that takes us to Little Wildwood." Holding Daniel close to her, she stood, then placed him in Senora Ketti's waiting arms. "Thank you, senora."

A dark, painted eyebrow suddenly shot up. "Whatever for, Senora McKennon?"

"For deciding to be my friend," Laureli replied quietly, touching her arm lightly to the older woman's arm.

Senora Ketti's eyes filled with moisture, even as she tried to force her voice to become high-pitched and brisk. "Ooh! Senora..." But the tenderness was undeniably there, and a smile lit her misty eyes even as her mouth became a thin line.

Court had just finished saddling his gelding and Belleza when the door to the bunkhouse opened and Joe moved into the darkness of the stable. He stood for a moment without speaking. Drawn by the curious silence, Court looked up, and Joe held something out to him.

“I brought these from Bolivar last week,” Joe said, grinning mischievously. “The best pair of angora chaps I could find. I figured you’d be wantin’ to spend time on the range during the roundup and a saddle can sure rub a good blister if you ain’t properly dressed.”

“Hell, Joe...” Court was at a loss for words. He and Joe had been friends since the first day they’d met, but he hadn’t expected such a sentimental gesture. He took the chaps, returning Joe’s grin. ‘‘How’d you know I envied you boys? I’ve been wondering how to go about getting a pair of these.”

‘‘It’s easy,” Joe replied. “You walk into a mercantile and say, ‘Mister, give me the finest pair of chaps in the place.’ An’ if he’s any kind of a businessman, he’ll give a man what he asks for.”

Court patted Joe roughly on the shoulder. “Thanks, Joe.” Court strapped the chaps over his legs and was just buckling them at the waistline when Laureli entered the stable. “How is this for a real cowboy?” Court asked, grinning proudly.

While Joe led their horses out of doors, Laureli moved into Court’s arms for a brief kiss. “You look like a real cowboy,” she teased, “but when you open your mouth, you’re still English!”

Court smiled rakishly. “I’m workin’ on it, ma’am,” he managed to drawl with the grit of a true Texan. “Now, how about you an’ me, li’l filly, ridin’ out to the range an’ herdin’ them bawling cows into a circle for the roundup an’ stampin’ their heinies with the Wildwood brand.”

Court dragged her first laugh of the day from her with his light teasing. Staring into the gray-black, loving eyes of her tall husband, she was able to forget that a man had been killed just a few feet away from where they stood.

“All right, my darling,” she chuckled, her arm wrapped around his lean waist as they walked out to join Joe, “let’s go see how much beef on the hoof we have to sell in Sedalia in the fall.”

All through the long morning and afternoon, they assembled the herd, watching as the cowpunchers with their broad-brimmed hats separated cows from un-branded calves, some mothers moaning in alarm and making threatening charges at the approaching cowboys. Laureli enjoyed the day as much as Court did on his first cattle roundup. Luck and Jan Walters had a branding fire burning against the butte of a wide ravine, and other men roped in the steers and calves to be branded and their left ears notched for identification.

The storm last night had not made the job any easier. By the time night fell again and the men and drovers began dragging wearily into the bunkhouse, not one was recognizable through the thick red Texas mud that clung to their skin and clothes. They’d had only one casualty on the rain-slicked range. Joe had

sprained his hand by allowing it to be caught in the ropes around his saddle horn as he'd dragged a calf toward the branding fire. When he rode into Wildwood with Court and Laureli, she affectionately ordered him to the house to have the hand doctored by the very efficient Pietra.

Exhausted themselves, Court and Laureli moved toward their bedchamber to bathe and change from their mud-encrusted clothing. Court's new angora chaps were soiled and probably would never come clean again. But Court didn't mind. Dirty chaps were the true mark of hard work. He had shown today how much he enjoyed working on the ranch and Laureli, her copper-colored brows creased in a frown, knew it might be impossible to keep him at home when the herd was brought together from the local ranches to begin the long drive to Sedalia.

Because a thirteen-year-old Laureli had been allowed to go on a cattle drive with Poppy and her father, she knew that it was a hard way for a man to earn a hundred dollars. There were always treacheries on the trail, renegade Indians, gyp water that many thought caused inflammatory rheumatism, the heavy alkaline dregs of a prairie stream. But there were also long lapses of peace on the trail: smoke-blackened dutch ovens clanging like dissonant bells, a good cook filling empty bellies with beans and bacon and beef, long, haunting nights listening to the mooing of the herd, the music of harmonicas and trail ballads sung by men propped against piles of bedrolls. As she lay on her bed, wrapped in her powder-blue robe, she sang one of the ballads to her bathing husband:

Little Joe, the wrangler, was called out with the rest;
Though the kid had scarcely reached the herd,
When the cattle they stampeded,
like a hailstorm long they fled.
Then we were all a-ridin for the lead.
The next morning just at daybreak,
we found where his horse fell.
Down in a washout twenty feet below:
And beneath the horse, mashed to a pulp,
his spur had rung the knell.
Was our little Texas stray, poor Wrangling Joe.

Laureli and Court laughed together when she had sung the last stanza of the ballad. ‘‘Damn, what a beautiful voice to be singing such a miserable song!" Court chuckled. "I do believe you're trying to frighten me... worried that I'll go on the drive, huh, little wife?"

‘‘Do you want to?" she asked cautiously, lest she plant an idea in his head that he hadn't considered.

As he rubbed soap on his shoulders and briskly lathered himself, Court mulled

over the question for a moment. “I’ll bet it’s a hell of an experience. But—”

When he grinned broadly and his eyes narrowed as they met her gaze, she goaded him on. ‘‘But what?”

“I don’t think I could stand all those months away from you.”

“If you want to go, I will understand.”

“And you won’t miss me?” he asked with tender inffection.

“I’ll miss you terribly,” she replied, easing to her back and drawing her knees up. “It’s such a wonderful experience... a trail drive... a few dominant steers marching instinctively to the head and the others following... across gullies, through rivers and creeks. I remember one old steer that proved so valuable as a leader that Papa spared him from the slaughter chutes. That steer—Papa called him Old Bowlegs—led the drives for fourteen years, with a big steel bell around his neck, until he just keeled over dead from old age. Papa sure was fond of that raggedy old cow. For the longest time his horns were mounted over the mantel in the parlor, until Mama had them taken down. She loved Old Bowlegs, too, but she didn’t like having his horns in her fancy Queen Anne parlor.”

She had been so lost in her daydream that she had not heard Court rise from the bathtub and dry off. A damp towel wrapped around his hips, he dropped to the bed beside her. “Why don’t you go with us, Laureli?”

She smiled as she eased her hands to the back of his neck and met his loving gaze. “I would love to... but I won’t leave little Daniel that long.”

“Next year then?”

“Perhaps... I guess this means that you will go on the drive?”

He shrugged carelessly. “That’s a question that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no. Yes, I want to go... but no, I don’t want to leave you.”

Oh, she couldn’t be that selfish! She knew how much he wanted to go. She had seen the excitement of the herd run through his veins today. She knew he had an adventurous heart and that more than anything he wanted to go on that drive next week. Thus, she favored him with an almost imperceptible smile and said with as much sincerity as she could muster, “I want you to go, Court... because I know you are aching to make the trip, and because reunions are so sweet. I will be here when you return... and next year, I might make the trip, too.”

Lowering himself to her. Court gently imprisoned her mouth against his own. “God, if we didn’t have to go to Jessie’s blasted meeting, I would invite you beneath those cool clean sheets.”

‘‘And I would accept the invitation,” she replied with feigned timidity, ‘‘if we didn’t have to go.”

Groaning inwardly. Court pushed himself up and began dressing in the fresh change of clothing Laureli had laid out on the bed for him. She wore the powder-

blue and rose gingham gown with its delicate ecru lace that he'd brought her from New Washington some weeks back. Moments later they were riding over the rain-drenched road leading to Little Wildwood in the ranch's only carriage.

Night had just fallen when the family sat down to dinner. Jessie sat at one end of the table. Poppy at the other, with the adult members on either side: Laureli and Court, Tia, Consuelo, Derrick and Ilona, Pavina, Marita—all of them. The children, as usual, sat around the large table in the kitchen where they engaged in food slinging and fun and placing bets on which of Tia's delicious pastries would be served for dessert. Laureli smiled. Daniel would be old enough to join the playful revelry in a couple of years, and she shuddered at the habits he would form.

After a very solemn dinner hour, Jessie sent the children to play outside and asked the adults to join him in the parlor. At his direction, Consuelo brought a tray of peach brandy and poured a goblet for each of them. Only when they stood in solemn silence did Jessie raise his goblet and say, "To Sam..."

Confusion prevailed. Hesitantly the family raised their glasses and quietly echoed, "To Sam..."

Jessie quickly drank down the goblet of brandy. "I want to tell you about Sam," he announced dryly. "I think it's time."

Of course, Pavina, Marita, Derrick, and Laureli did not remember Sam. But they had been hearing his name for years—and speculating along with the rest of the family as to his fate—so they were as interested in what Jessie had to say as the others who had known him.

Jessie seemed to have read their thoughts as he began to speak. "Court, Laureli... Derrick, Ilona... my girls... I know you didn't know Sam but you have grown up on the Brazos hearing his name. You've heard that he was a bit of a rascal and a troublemaker. What you don't know is what happened to him."

Silence. Jessie took a moment to scan each of their faces in turn. When he hesitated, a very thoughtful look on his face, Consuelo spoke out with righteous indignation, "All right, you have us very curious. Tell us what happened to Sam."

"I buried him last night," Jessie announced, the tremble he felt deep within him rising to his throat. Looks of bewilderment met his gaze. "Yes, I buried him next to my mother, Elsa," he continued. "He died up on that hill by the line shack twenty-four years ago, about the same time that the Alamo fell."

A thousand questions collected in Laureli's head. She had always known there was a mystery surrounding Sam and that Jessie had all the answers. She wanted to ask her questions, but she could not sort out the most important one. She was fairly certain that this was not a topic Jessie would allow to dominate the

evening, even if it was the reason he had called them together. Thus, she asked, “How did he die, Jessie?”

During the night Jessie had decided that he would keep the secret of the gold, although he had also sworn not to lie to his family. He had composed several evasive answers for the evening. He smiled almost guiltily as he met Laureli’s gaze. “I once told Sam that I found the gold of Cortez. I told him that it was beneath the hill up by the line shack. When Sam found a deep hole up there he tied a rope to his ankle and tried to lower himself into the hole. He got wedged and he died. It’s as simple as that.”

“And was there gold down that hole?” Laureli asked, feeling the excitement of the prospect surge through her veins.

“Tell me, Laureli, what are the chances of there being gold beneath that hill?”

Laureli shrugged her disappointment at his reply. ‘‘I guess it is a rather ridiculous notion,” she conceded.

“Anyway, that’s what happened,” Jessie continued. “I didn’t want you to know what a greedy rake Sam was, so I decided not to tell you that I’d found him dead. I just threw some dirt in the hole and kept his secret.”

Consuelo’s round face pinched into a frown. “And why have you decided to tell us after all these years?” she asked sensibly. Jessie sorted through his composed answers. He couldn’t tell them about the night that he thought Sam’s ghost had appeared to him. He couldn’t tell them about the big stallion that had never been known to exist on the Brazos. He would not subject himself to that ridicule. His lack of an answer worried Consuelo. She moved beneath Jessie’s arm and held him close. “You are not dying, are you? And getting this off your chest before you are planted under the ground, too, eh?”

Jessie laughed. “No, indeed. I plan to Hve long enough to be a pest to you, Consuelo.” His voice immediately assumed a serious tone. “I just want Sam to rest in peace. He always liked my mother, and she liked him, too. I thought it was best to give him a proper burying place.”

Consuelo heartily agreed. “Then we shall gather tomorrow and speak words over Sam,” she offered, her eyes scanning among the faces of her family. “And now, if this gruesome subject is all over, let us have another goblet of this delicious sherry.”

Poppy had listened intently, his fist drawn thoughtfully to his chin. So, that was what Jessie had been doing up on the hill all these Christmas Days. He’d been throwing new dirt on Sam’s grave. For one brief moment Poppy remembered that Sam used to rebel against authority.

After a host of questions about Sam that Jessie managed to answer as truthfully as possible, the family dispersed to the kitchen and Tia’s waiting pies. Only then

did Laureli ease beneath her Uncle Jessie's arm, hold him lovingly for a minute and whisper, "I know there is gold beneath that hill, my beloved uncle, and you'll never convince me otherwise."

Jessie squeezed her shoulder and favored her with a half-cocked grin. "How about a piece of that cherry pie that's waiting out in the kitchen?"

Court and Laureli spent a long, busy week on the range. On Thursday, Lord Wesley left Wildwood with his new packhorse in tow and the gold ring that Jessie Palmer had given him wrapped in canvas and tucked into the buttoned pocket of his shirt. He was a little skeptical about Jessie's explanation about where he had gotten the ring—that he had brought it up from Mexico City many years ago—but he had no way to refute Jessie's testimony. The ring was some consolation for the loss he had suffered up on the hill.

As a souvenir of Lord Wesley's visit, Laureli had the photograph he had developed of her and her family and also one he gave her of himself. She would never forget the strange little Englishman who had treated the bones of a horse as though they had been made of gold.

She was so happy, especially during those long, loving moments when she and Court were in their bedchamber. She wanted to have many beautiful memories in her heart while he was on the drive to Sedalia. That last night they were together, they rested in the aftermath of love, bathing in the warmth and comfort of each other. Laureli's sunset tresses lay upon his muscular chest, and she listened to his heart beat so gently against her ear. They would be apart for at least four months.

''I love you. Court," she whispered quietly, her eyes following the shadows that glimmered through the dark chamber.

Court drew her close to him. "I know," he replied huskily. "Tf you didn't, I'd take you across my knee."

Laureli nestled firmly against him. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you," he murmured in reply. In a sudden move, he drew her slim, nude body over his own and hungrily captured her mouth in a long, lingering kiss. "Don't look at it as me leaving you, Laureli... look at it as me returning to you. And look forward to some long, tender moments beneath these sheets."

Her powder-blue gaze connected to his teasing, loving one. "Is that a threat, husband?"

"It's a promise," he replied. ''And when I return perhaps I'll know a trail song to sing to you."

Laureli allowed herself to be mesmerized by the warmth of him, by his gently pulsating chest, by the tenderness of his hand soothing her bare shoulder. ''Not a trail song, my beloved... a love song. That is what I want to hear."

They held each other through the night, only half sleeping, listening to the

haunting melody of a warm breeze waft through the trees outside the open French doors.

There was no place in the world that Laureli would rather be than in Court's arms.

Epilogue

Come, read to me some poem,
Some simple and heartfelt lay.
That shall soothe this restless feeling.
And banish the thoughts of day
—Longfellow
April, 1867

The large white mansion that Court had built against the backdrop of the Brazos and its timberline of multi-hued greens had, miraculously, survived the devastations of the Civil War. The ranches along the river had virtually been wiped out of food stores, horses, wagons, and livestock, confiscated by the reviled ‘‘pressmen," as the Confederate agents had been known, or seized in federal raids and by deserters and stragglers of both armies. Laureli had managed to keep her mare and a few other good horses by hiding them out in the Raines cabin during the sweeps of Confederate and Union troops. The ranch was now operating on very little capital, with a handful of men who had survived the years of the war. Immediately following the war the large ranch known as Wildwood had lost everything except its land, but for Court and Laureli, it was all they needed to begin again.

Since Texas was farthest from the war front than any other Confederate state—an asset that droves of Southerners had been quick to exploit—many refugees from Louisiana, Mississippi and other states farther east and north had sent their families on hazardous treks from the front. Many of these nefarious individuals had settled on the east side of the Brazos and had commenced a series of raids during which they had ransacked what little remained of the once wealthy ranches.

Matthew and Mariah Cade had returned from England just months before the war had begun in April of 1861. Despite the tug of loyalty Matthew Cade had felt between his northern family and the state of Texas that he had made his home for thirty years, he had remained on the ranch during those tragic years from 1861 to 1865. While he had not actively participated in the military operations of the war, he had offered whatever he could of Wildwood's vast stores to the Confederate troops. Both he and Mariah had tried to encourage Court McKennon to take Laureli and their son back to England, but they, too, had refused to leave their home on the Brazos. Laureli's hotheaded brother,

Timothy, two months short of graduation from West Point Military Academy, had returned home, joined one of the Texas cavalry regiments as a captain, had been wounded at Gettysburg in ‘63, and decorated for bravery. He was now a Texas Ranger, the large police organization that had been disbanded during the war but was now making a new beginning.

Two years after Lee’s surrender, the state of Texas still had not been readmitted to the Union and was being run by Carpetbaggers and the Negro puppets put in office by Andrew Jackson’s administration. The Cades and McKennons had somehow managed to retain ownership of Wildwood, in part, because of the discovery of several antique gold items that had washed up on the Brazos during a thunderstorm in the spring of ‘64. After its discovery, the gold breastplate and jewelry had been hidden away during the years of the war, then had been melted down and sold to pay the post-war “punishment” taxes and other charges levied against the ranch—indeed, throughout the defeated South—by northern politicians.

Although Court had not worn a Confederate uniform during the war, he had been heavily engaged in arms traffic across the Rio Grande from Mexico into eastern Texas. Jessie had joined him in that secretive mission after he had been declared too old—at forty-eight—to join the Texas militia. Foreign ships docked at Bagdad, a Mexican port immune to the U.S. Navy’s blockade, had been engaged in trading Enfield rifles and other accoutrements for bales of Texas cotton needed by the mills of Europe. Because the cattle had been confiscated during the war. Court had planted cotton at Wildwood and had encouraged other ranchers to follow him in that endeavor. Court had never personally approved of slavery, but he had taken up the cause of Texas since he had made it his home. He had never once considered returning to the safety of England.

The war had taken its toll on the ranches of the Brazos: Both sons of Rollo Traylor, under the command of Col. Edward Canby, had been killed at Peralta, about fifteen miles below Albuquerque; Anglo had been killed in a skirmish at the Rio Grande while he, too, had been engaged in running guns, and most of the ranches had lost men to the war. Luck Walters of Wildwood had been killed at Chancellorsville. The closest near-casualty on the Brazos had been Jessie’s youngest son, Joel, who had been shot in the abdomen just a mile from Little Wildwood, his small horse, and the few pennies in his pockets stolen by Confederate deserters. His life had dangled by a thread for weeks, but the young boy’s determination to live had brought him through the crisis.

Those tragic years were over now, and Laureli found life beginning to return to normal at Wildwood. Court and Joe Fuller had made a trip to California and had brought back a hundred and seventy Hereford cows and a bull, and twenty

Arabian horses bred by a rancher whom he had met during his months in San Francisco. They expected the herd to at least double in size each year and put Wildwood back into competition as a stable, profitable ranching enterprise.

Even after the discovery of the antique gold items in the Brazos, Jessie had remained adamant that the cavern he had discovered had been a dream produced by his delirium. But Laureli knew better now, and it had become somewhat of an adventure to walk along the banks of the Brazos and keep an eye out for some shiny object gleaming beneath the water's edge.

Just moments after dawn on this warm April day, Laureli and Court and their eight-year-old son walked along the riverbank. They were still laughing over something Pietra had said at breakfast about the rooster named Purgatory who had once terrorized Wildwood. Unfortunately, the replacement that Tia's grandson had brought over before the war had ended up as dinner for a small band of Confederate stragglers, and after three years, Pietra was still sniffling about the loss of her pet. The young rooster had been every bit as terrorizing as Purgatory had been. She and Court were able to laugh about the rooster's fate now, but they hadn't dared laugh at the breakfast table.

They had just dropped a blanket on a cool patch of clover and sat down when Poppy and Jessie arrived. Poppy, now in his mid-seventies, was still as spry as Laureli remembered in her youth, and his pale-blue eyes twinkled merrily as he bent to his knee and fondly grazed her cheek with the back of his fingers.

''How's my favorite granddaughter?" he asked.

Laureli merely smiled and Court replied with a low chuckle. ''She's wonderful. See the glow in her cheeks?"

"And what is causing this glow?" Poppy asked, his frown marked by an ever so slight tinge of humor. "Our gossiping Tia has told me that you might possibly be __"

''Yes," Laureli replied quietly, taking Court's hand and tucking it between her warm fingers. "Court and I are expecting another child."

Poppy looked down the bank at his great-grandson throwing pebbles across the rocky current of the Brazos. "Well, it's about time you gave that boy a little brother or sister. An only child is a rotten child. Have you decided on a name?"